TRAGEDY

John Drakakis

Routledge

the **NEW CRITICAL IDIOM**

TRAGEDY

Tragedy is one of the oldest and most resilient forms of narrative. Considering texts from ancient Greece to the present day, this comprehensive introduction shows how tragedy has been re-imagined and redefined throughout Western cultural history.

Tragedy offers a concise history of tragedy tracing its evolution through key plays, prose, poetry and philosophical dimensions. John Drakakis examines a wealth of popular plays, including works from the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht, Sarah Kane and Tom Stoppard. He also considers the rewriting and appropriating of ancient drama though a wide range of authors, such as Chaucer, George Eliot, Ted Hughes and Colm Tóibín. Drakakis also demystifies complex philosophical interpretations of tragedy, including those of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Benjamin.

This accessible resource is an invaluable guide for anyone studying tragedy in literature or theatre studies.

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THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

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The New Critical Idiom is an invaluable series of introductory guides to today's critical terminology. Each book:

- provides a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse) of the term;
- offers an original and distinctive overview by a leading literary and cultural critic;
- relates the term to the larger field of cultural representation.

With a strong emphasis on clarity, lively debate and the widest possible breadth of examples, *The New Critical Idiom* is an indispensable approach to key topics in literary studies.

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John Drakakis

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his devastating critique of the term 'tragedy' and the language in which it has become usual to discuss it, Terry Eagleton observes that "Like comedy, it can refer at once to works of art, real-life events and world views or structures of feeling." (Eagleton (2003), p. 9) He argues that 'tragedy' then, would appear to evolve in a three-step process from describing a play or piece of writing to denoting an account of historical adversity, and from there to designating historical adversities themselves." (p. 14) He concludes, dismissively, that "Few artistic forms have inspired such extraordinarily pious waffle." (p. 16)

We have all been familiar with each of the steps that Eagleton describes, from engagements with the plays of ancient Greek dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides, their rewritings in the plays of the Roman Seneca and their translations, adaptations and appropriations across the centuries to our own time; through a narrative of "historical adversity" in general, to particular, often catastrophic "historical adversities themselves." Eagleton's introduction of a phrase Raymond Williams used, "structure of feeling" is worth pausing over in this context because it speaks to a problem that classical scholars have had to face when dealing with the ancient world. When asked to reflect on the efficacy of the phrase, Williams drew a clear distinction between "an

articulate structure of feeling," which in the case we are dealing with, ancient Greek drama, seems to have been relatively explicit in its concerns, and in the texts that remain, and "inarticulate experience" which might point to complex but partly unexpressed social and political pressures that are 'lived' as 'experience.' (Williams (1981), pp. 166–72) Although his focus was on the nineteenth century where Williams sought to draw a distinction between "the knowable" but "incomplete" community (p. 172) and "experience [as] a lived contact with the available articulations, including their comparison" (p. 171), his caution has a more general application and raises questions concerning the *ideological* aspects of those ancient Greek theatrical texts that have come down to us, and that still perform cultural work in shaping certain kinds of experience. This is an issue that will be taken up in later chapters and will involve the ways in which we are invited to *read* ancient Greek tragedy.

It is this category, transposed, occasionally, into everyday events, that has become the most common to be invoked, where usually any species of personal suffering or death can be described as 'tragic.' One example that strains the term by its unusual combination of the formal and the contingent might be the case of the death of the Welsh comic performer, Tommy Cooper. Deaths of performers onstage are by no means unusual and there is a long list of musicians, pop stars and even professional wrestlers that come to mind. However, the case of Tommy Cooper, who died onstage in the middle of a televised performance from Her Majesty's Theatre in London, *Live from Her Majesty's*, on 15 April 1984, compressed together virtually all of the elements that we associate with the epithets 'comedy' and 'tragedy.' The 'reality' of Cooper's life was that during the 1970s he had suffered heart attacks, and was known for his excessive smoking and drinking. His TV appearance in April 1984, designed as a 'come-back,' featured a series of conjuring tricks that invariably failed, giving the hilarious impression that he was a casually incompetent magician. His fatal heart attack occurred when he put on a gown as preparation for yet another inept conjuring trick and slumped backwards onstage. The theatre audience thought that this was part of his comic act and laughed, but Cooper's death was real; indeed, what began as 'comedy' was later described as a 'tragic' event.

That Tommy Cooper's death was 'sad' goes without saying, but it was not catastrophic, nor was it the punishment of some divine power. The fact that the theatre audience thought that it was part of an act

demonstrates the uncomfortable proximity of 'comedy' to more serious concerns, especially death. We might remind ourselves of another, this time fictional, transposition from 'comedy' to 'tragedy' as an expected conclusion is subverted. Halfway through the final act of Shakespeare's comedy *Love's Labours Lost* (c.1595) Mercade, an ambassador of death interrupts the ostensibly comic proceedings to tell the Princess that her father has died, with the result that the play's formal comic ending is postponed. Having egregiously undermined the linguistic currency of 'love' in the play, even the knowing courtier Berowne is forced to prove his alleged sincerity by visiting "the speechless sick" and "With all the fierce endeavour of your wit / To enforce the pained impotent to smile." (Shakespeare (1998) 5.2.839–42) Berowne's response is to highlight an impossibility:

> To move wild laughter in the throat of death?
> It cannot be, it is impossible.
> Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.
>
> (5.2.843–5)

And yet, because of the distance between the invented persona and the reality of the performer's death, this is, in fact, what the reality of Tommy Cooper's stage death appears to have done. Indeed, Cooper died 'cheering us up,' although perhaps not quite in the sense that Eagleton suggests is one of the many inadvertent definitions of 'tragedy' (Eagleton (2003), p. 9). In the modern world, what we might loosely call the 'fate' of celebrity stands in for a familiar experience that we are invited to observe, be entertained by, to share or, even more, to empathise with, only in the most vicarious of senses.

'Tragedy' is, today, a nuanced formal category of experience, an ontological category that is sometimes deployed to account for even the most haphazard occurrence that particularly involves death. Death is what will happen to us all and in the most fortuitous of circumstances, or if we are in the wrong place at the wrong time; at the same time, it is a particular event that we associate with a species of dramatic performance that has a long and complex theatre history; and it can also be the kind of narrative that extends beyond the formal constraints of drama to encompass all art forms in which mediated forms of contingency, fortuitousness, justice and suffering are intertwined. 'Tragedy'

is also a type of experience whose features shift as social, cultural and anthropological realities adjust to the pressures of representation, although this is not to say that the 'reality' it represents can be entirely and exclusively reduced to the manner of its signification. While, as we shall see, tragedy emerged historically as a particular kind of heavily ritualised dramatic performance, alien in many respects from what we might encounter in the modern theatre or in film or the novel, in all three genres constant reference is made to a systematically essentialised concept that we label 'tragic.' It is sometimes asserted that tragedy is a universal and trans-historical experience whose essence travels from culture to culture. But let us begin by asking the question: where did tragedy begin?

TRAGEDY AND MYTH

In his essay on "Tensions and ambiguities in Greek Tragedy" Jean-Pierre Vernant observes that tragedy is grounded in social reality but that it is much more than a reflection of it:

> It does not reflect that reality but calls it into question. By depicting it rent and divided against itself, it turns it into a problem. The drama brings to the stage an ancient heroic legend. For the city [Athens] this legendary world constitutes the past – a past sufficiently distant for the contrasts between the mythical traditions that it embodies and the new forms of legal and political, thought to be clearly visible; yet a past still close enough for the clash of values still to be a painful one and for this clash still currently to be taking place.
>
> (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (2006), p. 33)

Vernant does not develop the thought that ideology is embedded in myth, but he does refer to the "mythical traditions" that are the collective, conservative repositories of ancient Greek culture, and the "new forms of legal and political thought" that represent an emerging present. Paul Ricoeur has put the matter succinctly in his observation that "Myths, fairy tales, other-worldly promises of religion, humanistic fantasies, travel romances, have been continually changing expressions of that which is lacking in actual life." But he points out that these forms of "wishful thinking" were "more nearly complementary colours in the

picture of the reality existing at the time than utopias working in opposition to the *status quo* and disintegrating it." (Ricoeur (1936), p. 205) We shall return to this issue when we come to consider the extent to which tragedy, in whatever historical form, replicates ideology or subverts it. For the moment we should focus on the mythic content, not just of early tragic drama, but of the complexities of Greek culture out of which the drama grew.

H.D.F. Kitto. distinguishes between what he calls "historical or professedly historical" myths such as the Trojan cycle or other folk myths such as "Perseus cutting off the Gorgon's head" in favour of "the overthrow and mutilation of Cronos by his son Zeus, and the enormous number of goddesses, nymphs and mortal women who were successfully loved by Zeus and Apollo." (Kitto (1967), p. 197) Kitto emphasises the explanatory force of these myths, but in his attempt to describe their complexity in pre-historic Greek religion, he observes that:

> These 'early Greeks' were not a coherent nation, but tiny pockets of people who pushed and jostled each other about for centuries, settling here, resettling there, continually making contacts with new neighbours.
>
> (Kitto (1967), p. 198)

He identifies the exemplary myth involving the violent overthrow of Cronos by his son Zeus, and he suggests that "myths like this are an attempt to grapple with the origins of things, first of the physical universe, and then of the gods." (Kitto (1967), p. 199)

Kitto offers this as an 'explanation,' but we might think of it rather as a 'type of speech.' This is how Roland Barthes approaches myth in his book *Mythologies*, insisting that "myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form." (Barthes (1973), p. 109) Barthes is ultimately concerned with two things: with what he calls "the very principle of myth" which aims to "transform history into nature" thereby 'naturalising' it (Barthes (1973), p. 129) and the modern deployment of its structures designed to sustain "everyday life, civil ceremonials, secular rites, in short, the unwritten norms of interrelationships in a bourgeois society." (Barthes (1973), p. 140) Barthes is preoccupied with bourgeois society and he is concerned to point to the ways in which a particular process of mythologisation

accomplishes its objective. But his insistence that myth transforms history into nature (p. 129) opens the way to consider myth historically, and makes possible the identification of the link between other social formations and the ideologies that sustain them. It does not treat particular myths, as structural ethnologists have tended to do, as manifestations of what Lawrence Coupe has called "a necessary activity of the human mind." (Coupe (2009), p. 148) In his glossing of Ricoeur, and in his critical account of the practices of such structuralist ethnologists as Claude Levi-Strauss, Coupe argues, *contra* Kitto, that "we do an injustice to myth if we read it as an *explanation* of the world: it can then be assessed as being once true but no longer true, and so dismissed in the present as a false remnant of the past." (Coupe (2009), pp. 87–8) This is an important caveat when we come to consider the various emphases, omissions and transformations that tragedy has undergone through the ages.

Barthes begins his analysis of the ways in which 'myths' operate by considering the role of the professional wrestler, and he makes a surprising connection: "Wrestling participates of the nature of the great solar spectacles, Greek drama and bullfights … and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque. (Barthes (1973), p. 15) The performance is a "display, it takes up the ancient myths of public Suffering and Humiliation: the cross and the pillory." (p. 21) And in a final gesture that offers us a partial gloss on Aristotle's notion of *catharsis*, he draws a distinction between the performer in the ring, the person behind the performer and the moral and ethical drama in which he has just been a participant:

> When the hero or the villain of the drama, the man who was a few minutes earlier possessed of moral rage, magnified into a sort of metaphysical sign, leaves the wrestling hall, impassive, anonymous, carrying a small suitcase and arm-in-arm with his wife, no-one can doubt that wrestling holds that power of transmutation which is common to the Spectacle and to Religious Worship. In the ring, and even in the depths of their voluntary ignominy, wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible.

(p. 25)

This is not to say that what we are dealing with here is some sort of trans-historical universal truth, rather, that elements of the past are brought into the present and endowed with particular but temporary historical meaning. All cultures construct their myths from fragments of the past, so that, while we may recognise concepts such as Morality and Justice, we demand that they be intelligible to us, and we occasionally *assume* that other cultures, present and past, share our understanding of them. That assumption often leads to embarrassing instances of anachronism, unless we are prepared to recognise our own cultural and political investments in these concepts, and the myths that are deployed to give them meaning. At one level they may be simply 'explanations' in the anthropological sense insofar as they offer a description of particular social formations, as Kitto suggests. But they are also 'motivated' signs as Barthes indicates, and, when analysed, the processes of motivation embody the inflected workings of particular histories and the ideologies that underpin them, as Terence Hawkes has observed: "a complex system of images and beliefs which a society constructs in order to sustain and authenticate its sense of its own being: i.e. the very fabric of its system of 'meaning'" (Hawkes (2003), p. 107) Barthes goes one step further to argue that the very principle of myth in the modern bourgeois world effectively transforms history into nature. (Barthes (1973), p. 129) But as a primarily structural question this process is also applicable in different ways to all cultures. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to claim that the mythical narratives to which ancient Greece had access, the poetic forms and rituals with which they were imbued, and the cultural uses to which they were put, involved degrees of naturalisation and also degrees of idealisation.

TRAGEDY AND RITUAL

Ancient Greek drama is full of examples of what we might describe as 'ritual.' Indeed, as George Thompson observed, "Myth was created out of ritual," and he notes that:

> The latter term must be understood in a wide sense, because in primitive society everything is sacred, nothing profane. Every action – eating, drinking, tilling, fighting – has its proper procedure, which being prescribed is holy. In the song and dance of the mimetic rite,

> each performer withdrew, under the hypnotic effect of rhythm, from the consciousness of reality, which was peculiar to himself, individual, into the subconscious world of fantasy, which was common to all, collective, and from that inner world they returned charged with a new strength for action. Poetry and dancing, which grew out of the mimetic rite, are speech and gesture raised to a magical level of intensity.
>
> (Thompson (1941), p. 59)

In ancient Greek tragedy elements of mimetic rite remain. For example, there are altars, references to religious sacrifice, human and animal, and there are 'supplicants' who mount appeals to gods; in Aeschylus' *The Choephori* (1965) Electra and a Chorus come with "offerings to the dead" and in Euripides' *The Suppliant Women* (2009) Aethra, mother of Theseus, receives an appeal from a group of seven women from Argos who wish to be allowed to bury their dead. The German classical historian, Walter Burkert observes the proximity of 'myth' and 'ritual' in his suggestion that these "are the two forms in which Greek religion presents itself to the historian of religion." He goes on to define 'ritual' as "a programme of demonstrative acts to be performed in set sequence and often at a set place and time – sacred insofar as every omission or deviation arouses deep anxiety and calls forth sanctions." (Burkert (1985), p. 8) Ancient Greek tragedy deploys a wide range of customary ritual practices, but it often addresses differing interpretations of their elements and, more importantly, *violations.* In his enquiry into *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), and with the aid of evidence from comparative social anthropology, René Girard develops and refines the concept of ritual and suggests that its functional link with religion involves "the proper re-enactment of the surrogate-victim mechanism" whose function "is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism; that is to say, to keep violence *outside* the community." (Girard (1977), p. 92, emphasis in the original)

For Girard violence is a natural state that ritual is designed to appease and the mechanism for appeasement is the figure of the surrogate whom he defines as "a replica, as faithful as possible in every detail, of a previous crisis that was resolved by means of a spontaneously unanimous victimisation." (p. 94) The surrogate victim then becomes the means of re-establishing the order that has been destroyed in the reciprocal

violence that follows. He takes Oedipus as a yardstick of this process and observes: "Like Oedipus, the victim is considered a polluted object, whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community of its ills – as the sub-sequent restoration of public tranquillity clearly testifies. (p. 95)

Girard invokes the figure of the *pharmakos*, which was paraded about the city of Athens and absorbed impurities and could then either be banished or killed by the whole of the community. Jacques Derrida traces the term *pharmakos* back to its Platonic origin in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy," before repeating Girard's account of an Athenian civic ritual:

> The ceremony of the *pharmakos* is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside, which has as its function ceaselessly to trace and retrace. *Intra muros / extra muros*. The origin of difference and division, the *pharmakos* represents evil both introjected and pro-jected. Beneficial insofar as he cures – and for that, venerated and cared for – harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil – and for that, feared and treated with caution.
>
> (Drakakis and Liebler (1998), p. 348)

Girard modifies the findings of the early twentieth-century Cambridge Ritualists who linked this figure to seasonal change, "the 'death' and 'resurrection' of nature," and he urges us to "take care not to confuse the myth and the ritual on the one hand, with the essentially anti-mythical and anti-ritualistic inspiration of the drama on the other." (Girard (1997), p. 95) Indeed, it is at this point that we need to turn to the transition from 'ritual' to 'drama.'

In his book, *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), Victor Turner distin-guishes between the demands of 'ritual' and those of 'theatre.' He argues that

> Ritual, unlike theatre, does not distinguish between audience and performers. Instead, there is a congregation whose leaders may be priests, party officials, or other religious or secular ritual specialists, but all share formally and substantially the same set of beliefs and accept the same system of practices, the same sets of rituals or liturgical actions.
>
> (p. 12)

He then cites Richard Schechner's claim that "Theater comes into existence when a *separation* occurs between audience and performers. The paradigmatic theatrical situation is a group of performers soliciting an audience who may or may not respond by attending." (p. 12) However, this is too clear a separation to account for the relationship between actors and audiences in Greek tragedy. In his account of "The Audience of Athenian Tragedy," Simon Goldhill argues that the distinction between 'actors' and 'audience' was blurred, in part by the claim that "the culture of classical Greece was a performance culture," thus implying that the select audiences of these plays were required "above all *to play the role of democratic citizen*." (Goldhill (2013), p. 54). Theatre attendance, though voluntary, appears to have been restricted to certain categories of the population of Athens, and the price of a theatre ticket could be subsidised by the city. Moreover, performances themselves involved ceremonial displays that "in different ways promotes and project[s] an idea and ideal of citizen participation in the state and an image of the power and the polis of Athens." (p. 56) Ancient Greek drama has often been compared to medieval English drama although the Christian myths upon which the latter was based are very different from the polytheistic pantheon of gods whose activities were incorporated into the former, sometimes in controversial ways. Bearing in mind the proviso that we identified with Girard earlier, both kinds of drama, however, were performed during religious festivals, and both were designed to display membership of particular kinds of communities. In Athens, as Goldhill observes, the link between actors and audiences was symbiotic: "As the city and its citizens are ceremonially on display on stage at the Great Dionysia, so the audience constitutes what may be called 'the civic gaze.'" (p. 57)

The incorporation of myth and ritual into theatrical performance serves to 'invent' an Athenian identity, but this is not without difficulty. Polytheism, conflict and violence are all important formative elements in the emergence of Hellenic Greece, and these tensions are difficult for modern audiences to read. In her book *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens* Nicole Loraux attempts to chart the various ways in which Athens represented its own history to itself through a series of repressions of the violence that was deemed necessary to sustain the political concept of 'democracy.' She invokes Plato and the connection between 'the city' and the 'individual soul' and she concludes:

> The soul has become a city: a city with parties, enemies both within and without, and a council of elders and military leaders. In short, a city prey to *stasis* where it is necessary to impose harmony at all costs and forever.
>
> (Loraux (2002), p. 83)

Loraux seeks to develop the 'myth' of Athens, and to understand the politics that underlie its invocation of ritual practices. Her concern generally with Greek tragedy is in the manner of a "brief foray" (p. 167) although what she has to say about Athenian identity feeds very much into the plays themselves as the rituals, practices and political controversies find their ways, often in mimetic form, into the plays.

   Taken together, these are the critical tools that we need to understand before engaging more fully with the question of the beginnings of Greek tragedy. These ancient plays are, from a modern perspective, strange and formal, and as we shall see, the strangeness and formality emerges from their engagement with and representation of, aesthetic elements, some of which are easier to transport across historical periods than others. We will engage in later chapters with the various ways in which, from the Renaissance onwards, Greek tragedy as a collection of theatrical texts has imposed itself selectively upon dramatists, poets and novelists so that 'tragedy' has been in many ways separated from its historical moment of origin. And it is to that moment of origin and to the complex interweaving of 'myth', ritual' and festive theatre that we will turn in Chapter 2.

TRAGEDY AND MORALITY

But before we do that, we need to distinguish between what has come to be recognised as tragic conflict, and the issue of 'morality' with which it is often associated. To take 'morality' first: one of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of 'morality' is that it is "a doctrine or system concerned with conduct or duty," an important area of philosophy that stretches back to Aristotle's third-century B.C. *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1977) and *The Eudemian Ethics* (2011), through the Roman Cicero's (*De Officiis* (*Of Duties*) (2009), finding its way into the philosophy of David Hume (*A Treatise of Human Nature* (1961), and more controversially into Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887). The last of these

texts appeared some 15 years after Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (1956) which we will consider later. In his section on "Myth and Religion" in *The Greeks* (1967), H.D.F. Kitto draws an important distinction between the indiscriminate powers of the Greek gods and the limits within which human beings are able to act either to avoid, or even to thwart, those powers. This is how Kitto describes the problem, where the pronoun 'we' refers to ancient Greeks:

> Our life is in fact subject to external powers that we cannot control – the weather, for example – and these powers are 'theoi', gods. All we can do is to try to keep on good terms with them. These powers are quite indiscriminate; the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Then there are other powers – or so we hope – that will protect us: gods of the tribe, clan, family, hearth. These, unseen partners in the social group, must be treated with scrupulous respect. To all the gods sacrifice must be offered in the prescribed form; any irregularity may be irritating to them. It is not obvious that they are bound by the laws that govern human behaviour; in fact, it is obvious that some of them are not. That is to say, there is no essential connexion between theology and morality.
>
> (p. 195)

The final sentence is crucial here, in that it exposes a gap between what we might call prescriptive behaviour (that which theology demands) and descriptions of human behaviour (morality) that are often violated by other demands. The result is occasional ambiguity. The opposition between 'good' and 'evil,' central to the philosophical discussion of ethics, is not always easy to define in ancient Greek tragedy. For example, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the first of a trilogy of plays, set in Argos (c.458 B.C.), a city to the west of Athens, while Clytemnestra may be condemned as a murderess, the justification for the murder of her husband, Agamemnon, is that he had responded to a divine injunction to sacrifice their daughter Iphigenia in order to accelerate the ending of the war against Troy. The chaos that follows reveals that his punishment is the focus of a much more complex and lurid history; this includes the dispute between Agamemnon's father Atreus, the former ruler of Argos, and Aegisthus's father Thyestes involving the latter being given "his own sons' flesh" to eat. As Aegisthus (Clytemnestra's lover) puts it:

That deed gave birth to what you now see here, this death.
I planned his killing, as was just: I was the third
Child of Thyestes, then a brat in baby-clothes;
Spared and sent off with my distracted father, till,
Full-grown, Justice restored me to my native land,
I, from a distance, plotted this whole evil snare,
And caught my man.

(Aeschylus (1965), p. 98)

Both Atreus and Thyestes were descendants through their father Tantalus's line, of the Greek god Zeus, although what is uncertain is the cause of their mutual animosity. This in no way excuses Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon for which there is an immediate cause (the sacrificing of their daughter Iphigenia) but it does complicate the issues of 'sin' and 'justice.' After Clytemnestra has killed Agamemnon, the Chorus provides a gloss for what is a rapidly darkening 'truth' that exposes a long litany of revenge:

Reproach answers reproach; truth darkens still.
She strikes the striker; he who dared to kill
Pays the full forfeit. While Zeus holds his throne,
The maxim holds on earth: *the sinner dies*
That is God's law. Oh, who can exorcise
This breeding curse, the canker that has grown
Into these walls, to plague them at its will?

pp. 96–7, emphasis in original)

Clytemnestra picks up the clause "*the sinner dies*" and expresses satisfaction with what she has done, urging "the Powers that persecute / Our race" to "forget the past." (pp. 96–7) Aegisthus also accepts responsibility for "this evil snare" but he links it with the process of "Full-grown Justice." In *Agamemnon*, no one is free from taint, and so morality is entangled with a compulsion to revenge where the act itself serves to proliferate 'evil' and 'sin.' This projection of human behaviour onto divine sources further complicates the nature of 'virtue' and raises serious questions about the prescriptive power of theology and the morality that drives action. Actions are the result of a desire for 'justice' which compel the actors to act, but their actions repeat in cumulatively more

horrific forms those that stimulated them to act in the first place. We shall say more about this process in Chapter 2 when we deal with Aristotle's *Poetics*, which provides a formal template for 'tragedy.'

Aeschylus' trilogy (1965) contains two further plays, *The Choephori or The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. The first deals with the return of Orestes who proceeds to avenge the death of his father Agamemnon first by killing Aegisthus, and then Clytemnestra: "A victory," Orestes declares, "whose pollution makes my life abhorred" (p. 141), although he seeks to excuse himself from his mother's death: "It was no sin to kill my mother, who was herself / Marked with my father's blood, unclean, abhorred by gods" (p. 141) even though matricide was considered a violation of the moral order. *The Choephori* concludes with the Chorus's hope that with the destruction "The tempest's course is run" (p. 143). The issue here is whether Orestes' action is just or not. As one of the libation-bearers Orestes' sister Electra calls for an avenger: "let those who killed taste death for death, / Justly!" (p. 109) although the question is whether Orestes acts out of choice or out of compulsion. Clytemnestra admits her guilt but she also reminds Orestes of Agamemnon's 'sin': "Your father sinned too. Count his sins along with mine." (p. 137) In *The Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle observed that "Justice exists only between people who are subject to law, and where there is law there is also injustice because the law's judgement is what discriminates between what is just and what is unjust." (Aristotle (2011), p. 64)

It is this ambiguity that resides at the heart of the concept of a just revenge that *The Eumenides* sets out to arbitrate, as Orestes is brought before the court of the goddess Athene in Athens. Here the Chorus of Furies at the trial represents the "old" law, and complains that Athene's judgement upsets an old order:

> The old is trampled by the new!
> Curse on you younger gods who override
> The ancient laws and rob me of my due!
> Now to appease the honour you reviled
> Vengeance shall fester till my heart pours
> Over this land on every side
> Anger for insult, poison for my pain –
> Yes, poison from whose killing rain

> A sterile blight shall creep on plant and child
> And pock the earth's face with infectious sores.
> Why should I weep? Hear Justice, what I do!
> Soon Athens in despair shall rue
> Her rashness and her mockery.
>
> (Aeschylus (1965), p. 174)

Athene offers compromise insisting that her power of judgement comes from Zeus, and the Chorus is finally appeased by being offered both a place (Athens) and power. Under the guidance of Zeus Athens becomes the repository of justice and the terrestrial power of the Eumenides, the old gods, is contained.

Aeschylus' trilogy of plays rehearses basic issues of morality and the extent to which concepts such as virtue and justice that have an historical pedigree emerge in a world where the power of the gods has now shifted. For Aristotle "the virtues are middle states" and "these virtues themselves and their opposing vices are states that find expression in choice." (Aristotle (2011), p. 37) Also the 'soul' is the seat of reason and the basic opposition between virtue and vice is that they are concerned with "what is pleasant and what is painful, for punishments take effect through these, and punishments are a kind of therapy that, like others, works through opposites." (p. 17) *The Eudemian Ethics* does little more than acknowledge the existence of divine being as a prime mover: "For in a manner the divine element in us moves everything. Reason is not the originator of reasoning, but something superior. But what can be superior to knowledge and intelligence, except God? For virtue is an instrument of intelligence." (pp. 145–6) Aristotle reasons from human behaviour whereas Greek tragedy asks serious questions about the constitution of those superhuman forces that interfere to complicate the nature of virtue, vice and justice and the morality that influences human behaviour.

A second example would be Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* which demonstrates the consequences of trying to pit human ingenuity against divine decree. Oedipus has already saved Thebes to become king, by breaking the city's "bondage to the vile Enchantress" (Sophocles (1967), p. 26), but what hangs over him is Apollo's prediction that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus's pedigree can be traced back to Cadmus, who was to initiate the process by which Thebes was founded.

Being aware of Apollo's prophesy, Oedipus's parents, Laius and Jocasta, have him cast away with his ankles pinned together on a mountainside as a means of thwarting Apollo, while guarding themselves against the accusation of infanticide. The infant is saved by a combination of divine decree and human compassion, and he is taken to Corinth and brought up as the son of Polybus, king of Corinth, who he assumes to be his father. When Oedipus hears of Apollo's prophesy he leaves Corinth for Thebes, and on the way he unknowingly kills a man who turns out to be his real father, King Laius. He saves Thebes from the Sphinx, marries Jocasta and she gives birth to sons and daughters. The tragic irony is that both Oedipus's real parents and he, himself, have done everything that they could to undermine Apollo's decree, but that their actions only serve to bring it about. The human and the divine collide in what begins as a quest to save Thebes from another disaster, but this is linked to a quest for self-knowledge. At the beginning of the play the suppliant Priest and the citizens of Thebes make a clear distinction between the regal Oedipus and the gods:

> If we come to you now, sir, as your suppliants,
> I and these children, it is not as holding you
> The equal of the gods, but as the first of men,
> Whether in the ordinary business of mortal life,
> Or in the encounters of man with more than man.
>   (Sophocles (1967), p. 26)

Oedipus then embarks on a journey that is initially intended to save Thebes from pestilence, but this is the first stage in a deeper search for truth and identity. He saves Thebes only, in the final analysis, to be the source of its present corruption. Thus the virtuous man is forced into a stark visual recognition of his own vice. The unwitting killing of Laius was done in 'anger;' as Aristotle puts it: "When reason or appearance announces an insult or a slight, temper rears up at once, as if reasoning that one must take arms against anything of that sort." (Aristotle (2007), p. 99) But this "incontinence of anger" is followed by what Aristotle calls "incontinence of desires," which are the forces that presumably bring Oedipus and Jocasta together in marriage. Oedipus's persistence in seeking the truth culminates in the ocular recognition of his own 'sin':

> Alas! All out! All known, no more concealment!
> O Light! May I never look on you again,
> Revealed as I am, sinful in my begetting,
> Sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding of blood!
> <div align="right">(Aristotle (2011), p. 58)</div>

From the purely human perspective of Jocasta, the unfolding narrative reveals that human events are haphazard: "Chance rules our lives, and the future is all unknown. / Best live as best we may, from day to day." (p. 52) The standards of morality are shown in this tragedy to come into conflict with what from a human standpoint are the vicissitudes of daily life, and the extent to which they come into conflict with powers beyond human control. It is at this point of tension that the economy of tragedy is exposed: right confronts wrong, virtue confronts vice and good confronts evil, and they all co-exist in a spiral that appears to be beyond the capacity of humans to control. In his *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) Friedrich Nietzsche recognised this tension as a conflict between what ancient Greek culture regarded as important elements of 'order' and what the consequences were of release from its constraints:

> For these same men who, amongst themselves, are so strictly constrained by custom, worship, ritual gratitude, and by mutual surveillance and jealousy, who are so resourceful in consideration, tenderness, loyalty, pride and friendship, when once they step outside their circle become little better than uncaged beasts of prey. Once abroad in the wilderness, they revel in the freedom from social constraint and compensate for their long confinement in the quietude of their own community.
>
> <div align="right">(Nietzsche (1956), p. 174)</div>

Nietzsche had an unconcealed admiration for these "noble races" within whose depths "there lurks the best of prey, bent on spoil and conquest," (p. 174), although this is from a philosopher who advocated "a critique of all moral values; the intrinsic worth of these values must, first of all be called in question." (p. 155) Indeed, while Nietzsche celebrates the power of destructive energy, in *The Choephori* it is Orestes' sister Electra who laments at her father's grave the prevalence of human suffering and the fate of exile that she shares with her brother:

> Then, father, hear our tears' alternate song.
> Look on us, each your child,
> Both suppliants, both exiled.
> Where is one single good, not rendered vain
> By universal pain?
> What hope have we to wrestle with our doom?
>   (Aeschylus (1965), p. 115)

Aristotle observes, "in every divisible continuum there exists excess, deficiency, and a mean … And in all cases it is the mean relative to us that is the best." (Aristotle (2007), p. 18). Tragedy occurs when that 'mean' and the morality that sustains it are radically disturbed.

TRAGEDY AND PLEASURE

In the various attempts to find meaning in the myths, rituals and their theatrical representation in the form of 'tragedy' the question of 'pleasure' seems to have been obscured. Indeed, what A.D. Nuttall has labelled "the pleasure of tragedy" causes some discomfort. He aims to distinguish between Aristotle's "*oikeia hedone*, 'the proper pleasure' of tragedy," and "the gloating envious spectator." (Nuttall (1996), p. 1) Aristotle's *The Poetics* provides for Nuttall a filter through which mimesis can become both the source of pleasure and a yardstick to which subsequent epochs have returned and refined it. We consider Aristotle's contribution to an understanding of tragedy in more detail in Chapter 2, but the interrogative nature of Nuttall's title raises an important question. It may be the case that sado-masochists find pleasure in the violence enacted in, say, Sophocles' *Oedipus* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*. This might be the kind of brute pleasure that audiences of American professional wrestling derive from forms of spectacular and extreme violence that always threaten to spill out of the wrestling ring and into anarchy. The version of wrestling that Barthes analysed was medieval in its invocation of a clear morality, whereas the modern version endlessly manipulates that morality as wrestling stars periodically change their professional personae. Here also, the repeated (disingenuous) warnings not to "try this at home; these are professionally trained athletes" do little to dissuade spectators from actual violence. The dynamic of tragedy is different in that pleasure is often derived from the defeat of the

protagonist, and from a much more sophisticated triumph in the face of that defeat. Nuttall takes the matter in stages beginning initially with a glossing of Aristotle's notion of psychic discharge that "really does explain why pleasure might be possible for people watching a tragedy" (Nuttall (1996), p. 39) and thence via Freud and Nietzsche returning finally to Aristotle. He concludes a detailed reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear* with a rejection of the obvious truism that "Pity and fear are fun" to suggest that

> Aristotle's interest was engaged not by the initial thrill experienced by the audience as they sat in the theatre [this would be the stimulation provided by what is now called "sports entertainment"] but by their state of mind when the play was over, after the lucid demonstration of a probable or necessary sequence of events leading to the dreadful death of the protagonist.
>
> (p. 39)

For Nuttall, tragedy moves well beyond the domain of arousal, even though this is an element in a much more complex equation; for him the "special pleasure" (Aristotle's *oikeia hedone*) comes "at the level of conclusion or closure." He concludes:

> I do not wish to set aside as irrelevant the pleasure of arousal. There is no doubt that tragedy makes use of this phenomenon. But in tragedy the irresponsible pleasure of arousal is joined with bonds of iron to the responsibilities of probable knowledge and intellectual assent.
>
> (p. 104)

Although at one level this formulation is persuasive, it requires us to assent to a particular kind of "closure," one in which aesthetic satisfaction and the ideological commitment to a particular form of knowledge go hand in hand. When we come to Bertolt Brecht in Chapter 6 we shall see the political mechanisms by which the tragic protagonist is actually produced that will require us to adjust Nuttall's model of tragic pleasure. However, in the next chapter we will consider the historical beginnings of tragedy and the various ways in which its elements underwent historical transformation.

2

HISTORIES, ARCHAEOLOGIES AND GENEALOGIES

It is generally thought that tragedy originated in Athens during the hundred years between the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Indeed, one commentator has observed that what used to be called "Classical Greek tragedy" is now more accurately called "fifth-century Athenian tragedy." (Hall (2013), p. 94) Jean-Pierre Vernant argues that the emergence of tragedy developed alongside the emergence of law in the ancient Greek world, as "the entire mental universe of religion" that is "present in the rituals, myths, and graphic representations of the divine" gives way to a range of "social institutions, human practices, and mental categories" and that "it is these that define legal thought as opposed to other forms of thought, in particular religious ones." (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990), p. 30) It is for this reason that Vernant wishes to emphasise the "*con*text" of tragedy, which is "not so much a context as an under-text, which a scholarly reading must decode within the fabric of the work." (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990), p. 31)

The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* states that

> tragedy in Greece was a religious ceremony in the sense that it formed part of the festivals of Dionysus, and that it dealt with grave

> religious problems, but it was not an act of worship in the same way
> as the dithyramb, in which the chorus represented the Athenian
> people itself paying honour to the god, and its members remained in
> their own persons.
>
> (*OECD* (1961), p. 917)

This observation seeks to maintain a distinction between the notion of
the audience as a congregation, and the dynamic of a theatre in which
actors and audience are separated from each other conceptually as well as
physically. As we saw in Chapter 1 elements of religious practice are
represented onstage, and their contextual value is important, but we risk
misrepresenting tragedy if we reduce it to the question of religion.
Nonetheless, and despite the speculations to which commentators have
occasionally resorted, it would appear there is some connection between
the religious festivals to celebrate the god Dionysus, and the etymology
of the term 'tragedy.' The Greek gloss on the term *tragoudia* is 'goat
song' and this has led to various suggestions concerning the relationship
between 'the goat' and the figure of Dionysus, and to the idea that a
goat was the prize given to the winner of the festival competition.

In his book *Dithyramb Tragedy and Comedy* (1927) A.W. Pickard-
Cambridge evaluated much of the evidence concerning the emergence of
tragedy, including the problems surrounding its association with the
dithyramb which originated as a choral song to the god Dionysus. The
dithyramb was originally an oral poetic form that Richard Seaford has
described as "a hymn to Dionysus, probably once consisting of solo
improvisation and choral refrain – sometimes sung by men dressed as
satyrs – in a procession escorting Dionysus into the city." (Seaford
(2006), p. 25) Precisely how the elements of these festivities merged
into what we have come to recognise as the form of tragedy is uncertain,
just as there are a number of theories that seek to explain the evolution
of the tragic Chorus from the solo performer of the dithyramb, into the
figure of the actor, and the emergence of distinct dramatic characters.
What we do know is that by the time of Aeschylus at the beginning of
the fifth century B.C., plays put on in the city Dionysia at Athens
consisted of a trilogy of tragic plays, followed by a 'satyr play,' although
here again the connection between the two elements has been subject to
a number of speculations. Pat Easterling suggests that early tragedy was
"inseparable from satyr drama, with the same playwrights competing in

the same event with tragedies and a satyr play." (Easterling (2013), p. 37) Pickard-Cambridge dismisses out of hand the idea that there is any connection between Dionysus and goat sacrifice "or of Dionysus conceived as a goat, in connexion with the city Dionysia at Athens." He goes on to suggest that there is no convincing connection between *tragoudia* and "the song of men dressed in goat-skins as the worshippers of the goat-god," and he concludes that the term "must be considerably anterior to the organisation of the city Dionysia as known to us; so that the controversy is not of great importance for the history of tragedy." (Pickard-Cambridge (1997), p. 173) This does not entirely explain the goatskin as the prize awarded to the best competitor in the festival Dionysia, nor does it entirely account for the 'satyr' play that usually accompanied a tragic trilogy. The situation is not helped by the fact that only one full satyr play survives, Euripides' *Cyclops* (412 B.C.?) (Euripides (2008)), although fragments of others remain.

Many of the plays that have survived, including the *Cyclops*, incorporate and embellish characters and events from Homeric narratives, all of which helps to comprise a quasi-mythical Hellenic past that the dramatists brought into the present. *Cyclops* recapitulates an episode from *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus, on his return from the Trojan War is imprisoned by the Cyclops who feasts on some of his crew. In a perversion of a Bacchanalian feast the Cyclops is made drunk and blinded in his one eye enabling Odysseus and his remaining companions to escape. In her introduction to Robin Waterfield's translation of the play, Edith Hall notes that some of the favourite plot motifs of the satiric plays included "servitude and escape, feasting and drinking, sexual pursuits, hunting, athletics, and inventions;" and that this exclusively male plot "revolves around alcoholic intoxication and morally unquestioned violence enacted against an outright villain who happens to be a homosexual rapist." Her claim is that "the plot is not the point" but that "what is at issue is the satyrs' perspective on the world and satyr-drama's relationship with its non-identical twin sister, tragedy." (Euripides (2008), p. xxviii) This is true up to a point, but the violence present in *The Cyclops* is of a rather different order from that in one of Euripides' tragedies such as *Heracles*.

It is only when we think of tragedy in relation to what the late Pierre Clastres called "the archaeology of violence" that we can, perhaps, extend this argument. In a direct challenge to the classical Marxist idea

of primitive society as one involving commerce or exchange, Clastres insists that this kind of society contradicts "the logic of generalized exchange, which is a logic of identity, because it is a logic of identification." To succumb to the logic of identification would involve the loss of "its very being and its difference, losing the ability to think of itself as autonomous." (Clastres (2010) p. 263) In *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-definition through Tragedy*, Hall outlines the various ways in which in the *Odyssey* the Cyclopes *invert* the order of Greek civilisation: they eat "dairy products rather than consume bread, meat and wine," they do not use bronze weapons, they do not involve themselves in agricultural labour and "they know no communal rules or assemblies." (Hall (2004), p. 52) Although the principles of 'violence' and the prevalence of 'war' are features that Greek civilisation share with Clastres' primitive society, and self-definition operates through *difference*, it is clear that the uncritical application of the epithet 'primitive' to Greek civilisation, especially that of Athens of the fourth-century B.C., risks diminishing the sophistication of which tragedy is an example. The inversions of the satyr play, insofar as we can generalise on the basis of a single example, appear to contribute to the deconstruction of tragic material even as it attempts to replicate some of its features in a lower key. This suggests an economy of difference that in tragedy operates to *define* Greek identity, but that in the satyr play pokes fun at the tragic materials themselves by appropriating them and subjecting them to laughter. What would seem to be a fundamental link between tragedy and laughter survived the ancient Greek example, and resurfaced in the jig that was often performed at the end of tragedies in England during the Elizabethan period.

We can see this contrast in Euripides' *Heracles* (2008) where the fate of Hercules grows out of a familial history of violence culminating in his murder of his wife and children. The city of Thebes is troubled even before Heracles returns from Hades, as exemplified in the initial confrontation between the tyrant Lycus, who plans to kill Heracles' family, and Amphytrion, Heracles' father, who is charged with defending his son's reputation for bravery. The history of this violence is complicated, having its roots in the disruption of kinship relations, *and* in the interference in human affairs of the god Zeus. Amphytrion, who has been the victim of Zeus's promiscuity, is the first to question the power of the god. After Megara (Heracles' wife) and his children are ushered into the house to prepare for death, Amphytrion voices the following regrets:

> Zeus, it turns out that there was no point in my having you as my wife's partner, no point in my calling you co-father of my son. It turns out you were less of a friend than you seemed. Though I am a man and you a great god, I am the better person because I did not betray Heracles' sons. You are a past master at sneaking into others' beds and taking other men's wives without their permission, but you don't know how to have members of your own family. Either you are an unfeeling god, or there is no justice in you.
>
> (p. 43)

This scepticism concerning divine power is repeated throughout the play, and becomes particularly focused on the devastating madness of Heracles when he returns from Hades and slaughters his immediate family. The focus on madness and on the contours of 'Hell' became the emphasis that the Roman Seneca sought to emphasise in his *Hercules Furens*. In his Introduction to the 1927 reissue of *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* T.S. Eliot points out that

> The characters of Seneca's plays have no subtlety and, strictly speaking, no 'private life.' But it would be an error to imagine that they are merely cruder and coarser versions of the Greek originals. They belong to a different race.
>
> (p. xii)

It was this emphasis on crime and the extreme representation of the sublunary world that attracted the attention of English Jacobean tragedians, as we shall see.

   Precisely how the cultural and historical materials of ancient Greek tragedy finally came together remains uncertain. Pickard-Cambridge attempts to produce an historical account of the progress of the god Dionysus beginning from "Thraco-Phyrgian stock" and he argues that

> it is probable that he was worshipped both in Thrace and in Asia Minor long before he was received in Greece ... While an elementary form of drama, probably at Icaria, at Acharnae and very possibly in other Attic villages also, was the foundation of the tragedy of Thespis, the worship of the god in the Peloponnese (whither it had also travelled by unrecorded stages) contributed in all probability [to] the

higher lyric elements which found a place in tragedy, and also the satyr-play which was brought into Athens from Phlius.

<div align="right">(Pickard-Cambridge (1997), p. 174)</div>

More recent scholarship has departed from the discussion of origins to consider the composition of Athenian society and the extent to which the tragedies it produced reflected or represented its social, political and cultural preoccupations. This Foucauldian shift away from "tradition, of tracing a line," and to an "archaeology," involves the problem "of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations." (Foucault (1977), p. 5) Foucault emphasises not continuity and linearity but discontinuity in an attempt to replace what he calls "the continuous chronology of reason" that saw "dispersed events – decisions, accidents, initiatives, discoveries" as something that the historian "re-arranged, reduced, effaced in order to reveal the continuity of events." (p. 8) Some aspects of this process were anticipated in George Thompson's pioneering book *Aeschylus and Athens*, first published in 1941 and republished in four succeeding editions before being re-issued in 1980. Thompson notes how in sociological terms the Ionian aristocracy was impelled "to call in question the origin and evolution of the world in which they lived." What was a tribal structure had organically evolved into a series of clans linked together by cooperation, competition, rivalry and the provision of services. (Thompson (1980), p. 76) These clans competed with each other for power and prestige, intermarried or engaged in feudal rivalries, and this balance remained until it was challenged by the growth of private property. (pp. 76–7) Thompson identifies the beginning of this social transformation during the tyranny of Peisistratos (560–528 B.C.) who made the worship of Dionysus official. In order to neutralise the power of the aristocracy Peisistratos revitalised the festival of the city Dionysia, and he introduced recitals of Homeric poems, with the intention of fostering a national self-consciousness. (p. 84) Peisistratos's tyranny barely survived his death, and its function was, as Thompson observes, "transitional." It provided a challenge to aristocratic dominance and it also "enabled the middle class to consolidate its forces for the final stage in the democratic revolution, which involved the overthrow of tyranny itself." (p. 86)

What Thompson describes here is a bourgeois revolution, and up to a point this view is shared by Perry Anderson. (Anderson (1981), pp.

35ff.) But as Anderson notes, and Hall emphasises, Athenian democracy should not be given a modern gloss as in its Hellenic guise the term described "a zenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist community, economically dependent on slavery and imperial tribute." (Hall (2013), p. 93) It was hostile to outsiders, and regarded women as inferior, while slaves were simply regarded as property; indeed, G.E.M de St. Croix distinguishes between slaves and "large numbers of free men and women, mainly peasant, living not much above subsistence level, who were exploited by the ruling class to a greater or less degree." (de St. Croix (2004), p. 226) These social divisions (with the possible exception of slaves) are important and are to some extent discussed by Aristotle in *The Politics* and *The Athenian Constitution*, insofar as they find their way into the realm of tragedy. There is some disagreement about how these social divisions in the fabric of Greek life should be described and accounted for. But it is important to note, what almost all commentators have recognised, that the historical emergence of Athenian democracy and its problems all found their way into ancient tragedy, suggesting that the problems of political organisation were important fault-lines in the urban Greek culture that these plays represented, even though they may not have fully succeeded in resolving them.

ARISTOTLE'S *THE POETICS*

Much of the information, and some of the methodology, with which ancient Greek tragedy is concerned is to be found in Aristotle's *The Poetics* (1953) which offered a careful, though not uncontroversial, rejoinder to his teacher Plato's banishment of the artist that had appeared in *The Republic*. It is to Aristotle that we owe the formal details of tragedy, many of which continue to be deployed in modern critical analysis. Although he did not produce a poetics of comedy, throughout *The Poetics* Aristotle was aware of the important distinctions between the two genres. For example, beginning from the principle that all art involves *representation* he proceeded to identify what he calls "the *means* of representation," and he continued:

> Since living persons are the objects of representation, these must necessarily be either good men or inferior – thus only are characters normally distinguished, since ethical differences depend upon vice

> and virtue – that is to say either better than ourselves or worse or much what we are.
>
> (Aristotle (1953) p. 9, emphasis in original)

This is the foundation of the essential distinction between tragedy and comedy: "[t]he latter sets out to represent people as worse than they are to-day, and the former as better." (p. 11) One of the basic elements of tragedy is its use and development of existing poetic forms, in particular the dithyramb, which, as we saw, is thought to have begun as a choral song to the god Dionysus and performed at Dionysiac festivals in Athens to the accompaniment of the flute. (Pickard-Cambridge (1997), pp. 47ff.) It was also performed at the Thargelia, "an early harvest festival celebrated in May" (Frazer (1994), p. 580), and attributed to the god Apollo, involving the acknowledgement of a series of vegetative myths and realised through a series of performed rituals.

Aristotle shows how the improvisations of the different stages of these performances culminated, in the cases of both comedy and tragedy, in the gradual emergence of the figure of the actor and the emphasis that came to be placed on dialogue rather than upon choric performance. He argued that it was Aeschylus "who first raised the number of actors from one to two" and that Sophocles introduced a third actor and "scene-painting." (Aristotle (1953), p. 19) Aristotle's claim that tragedy evolved from the 'satyr-play' (p. 19) is questionable, but the connection between 'epic' and tragedy seems more convincing. He argued that epic poetry, "was a metrical representation of heroic action" although it deployed "a single metre" and was in "narrative" form. (p. 21) Another crucial distinction was that epic narrative was not subject to the constraints of time whereas the tragic action occurred within a single day. (p. 21) Thus while Athenian tragedy made use of some of the material of Homeric epic, its formal constraints imposed limitations upon it as it did upon the celebratory rituals that were part of the Dionysian and Thargelian celebrations.

Perhaps the most controversial feature of Aristotle's description lies in the relationship between the six parts of tragedy that he enumerates: "plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song," and of these the relationship between plot and character has proved the most difficult and the most enduring. Aristotle insisted that the most important aspect of tragedy is "plot," which is "the arrangement of incidents,"

that, as he immediately went on to qualify, "for tragedy is not a representation of men but of a piece of action, of life, of happiness and unhappiness, which comes under the head of action." (p. 25) Indeed, he is adamant that tragedy aims at "not the qualities of character but of some action; and while character makes men what they are, it is their actions and their experiences that make them happy or the opposite." (p. 25) Over the long history of tragedy there has been a conflict between whether plot (action) or character predominates in tragedy, however Aristotle is quite clear in making an important distinction between the representation of action as the primary aim of tragedy, and character which is preoccupied with questions of morality and ethics; these latter questions are to do with the balance between virtue and vice (the 'mean') and what motivates humans to behave in the ways that they do whether that be the result of voluntary or involuntary impulsion. Aristotle outlined this in *The Nichomachean Ethics, The Eudemian Ethics* and *The Politics*, and although we need to be aware of the fuller explanations these three texts contain, we cannot pursue their detailed ramifications here.

Let us focus on the element that Aristotle regards as the central feature of tragedy, action – "the soul of tragedy" – as opposed to character which "comes second;" indeed, it is possible, he claimed, to have a tragedy *without* character, but it is important to note that what he calls "the emotional effect of tragedy" lies in "reversals and discoveries" that "are parts of the plot." (p. 27) A tragedy is unsuccessful if the element of character assumes primary importance over plot, and this will be important when we come to consider the *emotional* impact of tragedy and the pleasure that it generates. The action of a tragedy comprises a whole that consists of "a beginning, and middle and end":

> A beginning is that which is not a necessary consequent of anything else but after which something else exists or happens as a natural result. An end on the contrary is that which is inevitable or, as a rule, the natural result of something else, but from which nothing else follows; a middle follows something else and something follows from it. Well constructed plots must not therefore begin and end at random, but must embody the formulae we have stated.
>
> (p. 31)

Aristotle's "beginning" is not, strictly speaking, accurate even though he is aware of this, since in a number of Greek tragedies events take place before the 'action' proper in the form of a back-story, and to a considerable extent determine their course; for example, as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* the action is generated by the animosity of Clytemnestra towards Agamemnon because of the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia, and of Aegisthus for Atreus's expulsion of his father Thyestes from Argos, while in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* the decision to expel the infant Oedipus from Thebes becomes an integral part of the play's prehistory. Even so, the action must be aesthetically complete in that it represents a critical stage in a series of linked events, and must produce a response in the audience that will cause "pity and fear," emotions that are generated when "the incidents are unexpected and yet one is a consequence of the other." (p. 39)

We saw earlier that tragedy is a representation of action, whereby the process of imitation (*mimesis*) involves selection in the interests of unity in contrast to the structure of epic narrative in which incidents that may be unconnected organically are allowed to proliferate. The focus may be on leading members of families, or on individuals, who are in positions of power, people who, "like ourselves," share the audience's humanity and can generate pity and fear for their "undeserved misfortune." Aristotle goes on to describe both the character and the situation:

> This is the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him, he being one of those who are in high station and good fortune.
>
> (p. 47)

This bridge between actor and audience has been the source of some confusion in relation to the concept of *hamartia*. The so-called tragic "flaw" does not submerge the audience's own identity in the subjectivity of the protagonist, nor should we read this flaw as a feature of the dramatis persona's personal psychology. As an effect of the action what we might, from a modern perspective, read as the autonomy of the protagonist is fundamentally a *relation* between the action in which he/she is involved and the cultural milieu of the audience. (Drakakis and Liebler (1998) pp. 8–9) Indeed, the Aristotelian notion of personal autonomy is

deeply entwined in the elements of plot and, indeed, qualified by a genealogy in which it is enmeshed with the emergence from the pressures of the natural world of the gods, as Hesiod outlined in his *Theogony*:

> Night bore loathsome Doom and black Fate and Death, and she bore sleep, and she gave birth to the tribe of Dreams. Second, then, gloomy Night bore blame and painful Distress, although she had slept with none of the gods, and the Hesperides, who care for the golden, beautiful apples beyond glorious Ocean and the trees bearing this fruit. And she bore (a) Destinies and (b) pitilessly punishing Fates, (a) Clotho (Spinner) and Lachesis (Portion) and Atropos (Inflexible) who give to mortals when they are born both good and evil to have, and (b) who hold fast to the transgressions of both men and gods; and the goddesses never cease from their terrible wrath until they give evil punishment to whoever commits a crime. Deadly Night gave birth to Nemesis (Indignation) too, a woe for mortal human beings; and after her she bore Deceit and Fondness and baneful Old Age, and she bore hard-hearted Strife.
>
> (Hesiod (2018), p. 21)

In this context *hamartia* might be glossed as 'missing the mark,' the result of making a choice between alternatives of equal value that cannot be traced to the independent psychological inadequacy of the protagonist. Rather, the resulting 'error' emerges from the complex nature of the action of which the protagonist is ostensibly the bearer rather than the originator. Sophocles' *Oedipus* offers a very complex version of this scheme in that the protagonist's quest for knowledge is initially concerned with the plight of Thebes and his responsibilities as king. But as the action unfolds both protagonist and spectator are implicated in patterns of discrepant knowledge that ultimately expose the conditions of their formation. Tragic irony is located at the moment when social contradiction, which it is the business of ideology to obscure, is revealed.

One more important feature of Aristotle's account of tragedy involves the issue of *catharsis*: the idea that the effect of tragedy upon an audience is the purging of potentially harmful emotions. Aristotle is not here concerned in a didactic sense with some resulting morality that can be extracted by the audience from the tragic action as a sort of lesson.

Indeed, the pity and fear that the protagonist provokes in the audience does not involve the latter's loss of its identity as audience. A.D. Nuttall sought to restore the medical gloss on the term *catharsis* (Nuttall (1996), pp. 15ff.), although he also suggests that Aristotle does not offer "a Galenic account of emotions as physical humours, requiring actual excretion from time to time;" rather, "he is proposing an analogy: as the body seeks to ease its load of waste matter, so the soul – the higher faculty if you like terms of value – seeks to ease its burden of emotion." (p. 36) Thus the spectator leaves the theatre restored to the balance that the tragedy itself has disturbed, and to the happiness that that balance customarily produces.

It is, perhaps, within the context that Nuttall provides that we should position Aristotle's comments on the composition of the tragic hero. "This is the sort of man," Aristotle argues,

> who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him, he being one of those who are in high station and good fortune, like Oedipus and Thyestes and the famous men of such families as those.
>
> (Aristotle (1953), p. 47)

Taken at face value Aristotle would appear to locate the flaw in *character*, although the examples he chooses suggest that there is something embedded in the larger family structures of these plays – prior "actions" if you like – that circumscribe the choices of the protagonists. In other words, the flaw is located in the man but its origins are in 'action' that extends well beyond the question of his personal individual psychology. It is this that we have to take into consideration when describing "[t]he successful plot":

> The successful plot must then have a single and not, as some say, a double issue; and the change must be not to good fortune from bad but, on the contrary, from good to bad fortune, and it must not be due to villainy but to some great flaw in such a man as we have described, or of one who is better rather than worse.
>
> (p. 47)

In the case of Oedipus the 'flaw' is *in* him but is not of his own making, and the reminder of that flaw is in the etymology of his name (Oedipus:

'swollen foot'). Moreover, the issue of 'Fortune' as a term describing an initially inexplicable fall from prominence assumes a greater explanatory force, the further the human protagonist is away from the sources of divine power, the less he/she has control of events. This is an issue that resurfaces, during the medieval period where success in earthly life confronts the requirements of humility that are part of Christian theology.

But let us return to Aristotle's emphasis on the plot, where he initially isolates two elements in what he calls "the emotional effect of tragedy": these are "reversals" and "discoveries" (Aristotle (1953), p. 27) and which he will later go on to define further. A reversal (*peripeteia*) is "a change of situation into the opposite" (p. 41) although this extends beyond what we might expect of the protagonist or what he/she intends. Aristotle invokes the example of the arrival of the messenger from Corinth in *Oedipus* with the news that Polybus and Merope are not Oedipus's real parents, thereby leading Oedipus towards the truth of his birth and subsequent actions. The second term (*anagnorisis*) involves discovery that Aristotle describes as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing either friendship or hatred in those who are destined for good fortune or ill." (p. 41) Both of these mechanisms are indispensable elements of plot and both involve a reaction in the audience of "either pity or fear, and it is actions such as these which, according to our hypothesis, tragedy represents." (p. 43) In other words, it is the *effect* that these mechanisms have upon an audience that tragedy is responsible for representing since it is these that produce pity and fear. Aristotle then adds to this a third element "calamity" which he describes as "a destructive or painful occurrence such as a death on the stage, acute suffering and wounding and so on." (p. 43)

These are what Aristotle calls "the constituent parts" of tragedy, but he then offers a further quantitative – we might say, formal division of "Prologue, Episode, Exode, Choral song, the last being divided into Parode and Stasimon." (p. 43)

> A prologue is the whole of that part of a tragedy which precedes the entrance of the chorus. An episode is the whole of that part of a tragedy which falls between whole choral songs. An exode is the whole of that part of a tragedy which is not followed by a song of the chorus. A parode is the whole of the first utterance of the chorus. A stasimon

is a choral song without anapaests or trochaics. A commos is a song of lament shared by the chorus and the actors onstage.

(pp. 44–5)

W. Hamilton-Fyfe observes that the term 'stasimon' is attributed to "all choruses in a tragedy other than those sung during entry or exit." (p. 44 fn.a)

FATE, FORTUNE AND PROVIDENCE

What Aristotle describes here is a form that in its details would appear alien to the expectations of a modern audience despite occasional attempts by productions to reconstruct the conditions of ancient Greek performance. Moreover, while scholars have debated the accuracy of some of Aristotle's observations, *The Poetics* still remains an important critical document that subsequent centuries have sought to reinterpret. In addition to the confusion concerning character that we will revisit in Chapter 4, Jean-Pierre Vernant asks an important question that gets to the heart of what motivates action in Greek tragedy:

> What is the significance, in psychological history of the will, of this tension that the tragedians constantly maintain between the active and the passive, intention and constraint, the internal spontaneity of the hero and the destiny that is fixed for him in advance by the gods?
> (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990), p. 79)

Vernant suggests that there emerges a distinction in a play such as *Oedipus* between "the ancient religious conception of the misdeed as a defilement attached to an entire race and inexorably transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of an *atē* or madness sent by the gods," and a new legally based conception "according to which the guilty one is defined as a private individual who, acting under no constraint, has deliberately chosen to commit a crime." According to Vernant, questions of "decision and responsibility" remain enigmatic in tragedy and they are undecided because they raise "questions that, in default of any fixed and unequivocal answers, always remain open." (p. 81)

What Vernant pinpoints is a kind of emergent individualism in Greek culture where action could be the exclusive preserve of human

agency, but "[w]hat it lacked was the power of realization, the efficacy that was the exclusive privilege of the divine." (p. 83) He concludes:

> Tragedy expresses this weakness inherent in action, this internal inadequacy of the agent, by showing the gods working behind men's backs from beginning to end of the drama, to bring everything to its conclusion. Even when, by exercising choice, he makes a decision, the hero almost always does the opposite of what he thinks he is doing.
>
> (p. 83)

In order to understand the nature of the links between gods and humans we need to return to Hesiod's *Theogony* where a clear genealogy and a mythography are laid out. The ascendancy of Zeus is charted, and his acquisition of wisdom, good and evil is described as part of an entire polytheistic structure; the emergence of the seasons, of law, justice (*Dike)* and peace is then accounted for in relation to "care for the works of mortal human beings." Of particular importance were "the Destinies," upon whom the counsellor Zeus bestowed the greatest honour, Clotho and Lachesis and Atropos, who gave to mortal human beings both good and evil. (Hesiod (2018), p. 75)

Good and evil were initially properties of godhead, but they were bequeathed to human beings in such a way as to offer them a limited, but carefully circumscribed, freedom. In some ways the idea of choice that this implies points forward to Renaissance debates concerning the role of free will in Christian theology, but we are still some distance away from this. Indeed, Hesiod described what Vernant has called "this internal inadequacy of the agent," by mapping out the ways in which the gods operated "behind men's backs from the beginning to the end of the drama." (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990), p. 83) The conflict between 'freedom' and 'determination' was, as Walter Burkert observed, part of a lifelong struggle that was dependent upon how the various elements of the world were "apportioned" and how boundaries were "drawn in space and time." The mechanism of apportionment was *Moira*, which was "not a person, not a god, or a power, but a fact" that was the means of demarcating all boundaries including "the most important and most painful boundary … death." (Burkert (1998), pp. 29 and 174)

All of these elements were part of a polytheism that accommodated different kinds of religious emphasis, what H.D.F. Kitto described as "a

religion that had to do with the social group and a religion that had to do with nature-worship." (Kitto (1967), p. 200) Greek tragedy did not simply represent "mythological personages," rather, the plays focused on the dramatists' "strivings with the religious, moral philosophical problems of their time, and they used myth much as Shakespeare used Holinshed – and with just as much freedom." (p. 201) It is also within this context that Aristotle's "good fortune or ill" (Aristotle (1953), p. 41) requires to be read as parts of the process of apportionment within whose boundaries the human subject is constrained to act. It was not until the early modern period that 'Fortune' emerged as a more secular means of describing those pressures that were beyond the individual's control. For example, Machiavelli's *The Prince* has a long chapter entitled "Of New Principalities Gotten by Fortune, and Other Men's Forces" in which he explores the pragmatism required to secure and maintain political power, ending with a reference to the reign of Caesar Borgia and to the Old Testament book of Daniel, attributing to a Christian God the power to control human affairs:

> Policy shewed it selfe short sighted; for hee foresaw not at the time of his Fathers death, he himself should bee brought unto deaths doore also. And methinks this Example might have given occasion to our Author to confesse, that surely there is a God that ruleth the earth. And many times God cutts off those cunning and mighty men in the hight of their purposes, when they think they have neare surmounted all dangers and difficulties.
>
> (Machiavelli, (1640), pp. 60–1)

Invariably Machiavelli concerns himself with the human errors of government, and here the invocation of the supreme power of God provides an ideological weapon designed to protect the authority of powerful men. In this context 'Fortune' is simply that which is beyond the individual's control, while the rule of God is made to seem remote by comparison with the divinities, problematic though they may be, that oversee and frequently intervene in human affairs.

Machiavelli is concerned with one God, but the polytheism of ancient Greece was imagined in human terms with the result that, as H.D.F. Kitto argues, "[t]he gods became, one might say, sublimated Kings" while "the impulse to unity and order reduced the number of gods and

combined them into a family and a family council." (1967, p. 196) Kitto observes that "[t]he powers therefore that rule the physical universe must also rule the moral universe" with the result that the gods become "spiritualised," and that "other divine powers, like the Furies or Erinnyes who punish violence and injustice," including "Ananke or Moira," become the agents of Zeus. (p. 197) With a greater critical emphasis on worldly matters, on the physical world as a post-lapsarian world and on individual success or failure, Renaissance Christianity in its various forms established an even closer link between secularism and morality, to the extent that success or failure in everyday life depended upon how individuals behaved, and how that behaviour could determine the expected quality of an afterlife. Renaissance Protestantism came to understand what Max Weber identified as "work in the world" as evidence of a "calling" imposed upon the individual by "a special command of God" to fulfil particular duties determined by "the Divine Will." (Weber (1976), pp. 84–5) This placing of the individual in the world by God was regarded as "a direct manifestation of divine will" and involved an emphasis on Providence, which Weber describes:

> The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life. While his economic traditionalism was originally the result of Pauline indifference, it later became that of a more and more intense belief in divine providence, which identified absolute obedience to God's will, with absolute acceptance of things as they were.
>
> (p. 85)

This is precisely the conclusion to which Hamlet comes immediately before the final confrontation with Claudius in Shakespeare's play. What we might recognise as contingency, the Prince, on his return from England, acknowledges as the operation of a divine power; he dismisses Horatio's caution following the challenge to "play" a duel with Laertes, with an invocation to a Protestant Providence:

> Not a whit. We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now.

> If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is't to leave betimes. Let be.
>
> (Shakespeare (2006), 5.2.197–202)

Hamlet's "The readiness is all" is crucial here in that it allows him to behave as though he is free, thereby countering a possible claim that he is rigidly predestined to a fate over which he has absolutely no control. In the later version in *King Lear*, it is Edgar who offers the less active alternative that is closer to stoicism when he seeks to pacify his father after the defeat of Lear and Cordelia. Earlier Gloucester had lamented that "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare (1997), 4.1.38–9), but later he seeks to console his father by acknowledging the impossibility of resistance: "What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither. / Ripeness is all." (5.2.9–11)

The alternative to stoic acceptance is a focus on human activity, especially of the kind that violates moral and ethical norms, of which crime is a cardinal example. Thus, a combination of stoic acceptance, and an assertion of individuality alongside a willingness to accept things as they are was what some Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists found so appealing, and it addresses, modifies and adapts the question of motivation that in its various forms had come down from ancient Greek drama. Indeed, while we may recognise the appeals in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy to recognisably Greek deities, these exist uncomfortably alongside various emphases on elements of Christian theology, and with the advent of Renaissance humanism, on a tension between action and character that is rooted in practical questions of the behaviour of those in power. To this extent, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy developed aspects of radicalism that could be discerned in ancient Greek tragedy, and was further modified in Senecan tragedy, albeit the historical contexts in each case were different. In all these examples, tragedy emerges when faultiness in religious belief, in morality and ethics and in the relations between human contingency and what are often discerned as powers beyond human control are brought into question.

3

ONTOLOGY AND DRAMATURGY

We have suggested that tragedy has a dual significance: it is the name that we give to a particular kind of dramatic structure, a methodology, that has a long historical pedigree, but it is also an ontological category, what we might call a condition of being, with a content that is responsive to historical change. Very often these categories are intertwined, but at particular moments in history the dramatic structure, often the site of innovation, assumes primacy of attention and a new urgency. During the medieval period the ready definition of tragedy followed a simplified Aristotelian line, with Chaucer's observation in the Prologue to *The Monk's Tale*:

> Tragedie is to seyn a certain storie,
> As olde bokes maken us memorie,
> Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
> And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
> Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.
> > (Chaucer (1988), p. 241)

The emphasis remained upon the suffering that was the result of falling, but also upon the idea of narrative ("a certain *storie*"), while gradually

the moral element of tragedy as payment for deviation from the path of virtue came to assume a more prominent place within the framework of Christianity. In his *The City of God* (inspired by the sacking of Rome by Alaric and the Goths in 410 A.D.) St Augustine was prompted to consider the ways in which Christian providence operated. Unlike the pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses who variously interfered in human affairs, sometimes with no clear motive, St Augustine pondered on the extent to which "God's just judgment" allows him to invite "the wicked unto repentance as this scourge doth instruct the good unto patience." (Augustine (1967), 1.8) The Christian universe is, therefore, a moral universe regulated by God, who distributes rewards and punishments:

> The mercy of God embraceth the good with love, as His severity doth correct the bad with pains. For it seemed good to the almighty providence to prepare such goods, in the world to come, as the just only should enjoy and not the unjust; and such evils as the wicked only should feel, and not the Godly.
>
> (1.9)

If the wicked should have access to the benefits that God provides for the good, then the choice is offered to them in the hope that they will repent their wrongdoing. Indeed, "the same violence of affliction proveth, purifieth, and clarifieth the good, and condemneth, wasteth, and casteth out the bad." (1.9) In the Christian universe that St Augustine describes the choice is not between alternatives that are equally desirable or equally compelling, and for the faithful suffering has a purpose in that it determines the quality of an afterlife. Chaucer's definition of tragedy assumes that not all success in this world is providential, but that it may be temporary, resembling the trajectory of a wheel that allows the man that "stood in greet prosperitee" to thrive, but then to fall "out of heigh degree" and to end "wrecchedly."

This was also the model for John Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes* that began with the fall of Adam and Eve that Christ's conquest of death had 'raunsoumed":

> Therby men may / that prudent ben & wyse
> The ioyes clayme / whiche ben eternall

And entre ayen into paradise
Fro when Adam had a fall
To which place / above celestiall
O Christ Jesu / so brynge us to that glory
Which by thy deth / haddest the victory.
                    (Lydgate (1554), fol. iiii)

In part Lydgate rewrote a series of Greek tragic narratives within this Christian framework, and this became the model of tragedy that counselled the powerful to curb their behaviour and the meek to endure their suffering. It also minimised the tragedy of the crucifixion in favour of the conquest of death and the re-entry of the faithful into paradise. However, as the sixteenth century progressed dramatists such as Kyd, Shakespeare and Marlowe came to occupy a particular place in this gradual evolution since they all, in different ways, offered much more nuanced versions of the narrative of decline and fall by inviting not so much pity and fear at the plight of their protagonists as some degree of sympathy (if not empathy) with them. In an attempt to reinstate the overlooked French origins of English Renaissance tragedy Richard Hillman focuses on Shakespeare's *Richard II* as an example of a tragic protagonist whom, he suggests, "is felt to take on both emotional weight and psychological depth," an impression, that he argues is "produced by his relentlessly eloquent oscillation between flagrant self-deception and agonizing self-knowledge." The result is a delicate balance between "the play's cold-blooded political morality, which attributes disaster to the king's errors and others' ability to exploit them." The refusal to eradicate the protagonist's many "flaws," and his "larger than life" agony is made "universal, and most ironically, as transcending the banality to which he himself would reduce them for his own *Mirror for Magistrates* anthology: 'sad stories of the death of kings'." (Hillman (2010), p. 17) We might, of course, argue that a play such as *Hamlet* had a significant afterlife in the early nineteenth century by the conversion of the protagonist's experience into a universal phenomenon that could be detached from its immediate theatrical context. Hamlet's alleged pusillanimity became Coleridge's in the latter's statement that he had "a smack of Hamlet" in him. We shall return in Chapter 5 to this emphasis on 'character' and its role in the dynamics of causation.

However, while Christianity in its various manifestations concerned itself with metaphysical questions that dealt with the organisation of order, and the conditions under which the disposition of benefits and its consequences were undertaken, in the rapidly emerging theatre renewed emphasis was placed upon some of the issues that Aristotle had raised in *The Poetics*. The emphasis on the status of the tragic protagonist was underlined, as indeed was the choice between two equally valid alternatives, together with the 'flaw' in the protagonist that makes him behave in the way that he does. The Christian preoccupation with 'rise' and 'fall' gradually assumed a more secular context, where religious precepts appeared to collide with more pragmatic considerations that had to do with the acquisition, retention and loss of political power. Writers such as Machiavelli, Erasmus and Montaigne, Sir Thomas Elyot, Sir Thomas Smith and Richard Hooker, alongside classical figures such as Aristotle, Ovid and Virgil, helped to expand a rapidly growing lexicon of rhetorical, political, literary and cultural examples. The return to classical models, intensified by the influence of the Senecan rewriting of the ancient Greek tragedies, and the deployment of a range of classical non-dramatic texts as part of the Elizabethan education system, all found their way into the rapidly developing institution of the popular theatre.

In his attempt to locate the metaphysics of tragedy Georg Lukács contrasts a compulsion that is "the result of the inescapable workings of causality" and what he calls a "Being-necessary" that "leaps across all the causes of empirical life" and is "intimately bound up with the essence." (Lukács (1974), p. 155) Stripped of the accoutrements of "ordinary life" tragedy is the "moment" when the centre as self is exposed:

> It is a moment; it does not signify life, -it is life –a different life opposed to and exclusive of ordinary life. This is the metaphysical reason for the concentration of drama in time, of the condition of the unity of time. It is born of the desire to come as close as possible to the timelessness of this moment which yet is the whole of life.
>
> (p. 158)

It is also, Lukács suggests, a moment in which time is almost frozen to the point where we approach a "timelessness" that is desired. William Storm, in his book *After Dionysus: A Theory of the Tragic* offers a slightly

different version of this essentialism. He links the critical exposure of selfhood to a Dionysiac energy that while acknowledging "selfhood and identity," then tests "under the most extreme circumstances, the ability of that selfhood to cohere and retain its integrity." (Storm (2010), p. 26)

From the very beginning of Renaissance tragedy the concentration on 'selfhood' and the pressure to which it is subjected can be seen, for example in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587), arguably the first theatrical success of the newly popular Elizabethan theatre. Presiding over the action of the play throughout is the Ghost of Don Andrea, and Revenge, the one returned from purgatory because his "rites of burial" have not been performed, and the other a personification of an abstract force. Don Andrea's long description of his experience of the underworld shares an ethos similar to that of the opening dialogue of Seneca's *Thyestes* (2005) between Tantalus and the Fury Magaera. In Kyd's play the uncertain destiny of Don Andrea in the life after death initiates an action that is presided over throughout by his Ghost and Revenge:

> Here finding Pluto with his Propserpine,
> I showed my passport humbled on my knee:
> Whereat Proserpine began to smile,
> And begg'd that only she might give my doom.
> Pluto was pleas'd and seal'd it with a kiss.
> Forthwith Revenge, she rounded thee in th' ear,
> And bade thee lead me through the gates of horn,
> Where dreams have passage in the silent night.
> No sooner had she spoke but we were here,
> I wot not how, in twinkling of an eye.
>
>   (Kyd (1977), 1.1.76–85)

Don Andrea's passage through "the gates of horn" promises true visions, and so the ensuing action is stamped with the seal of 'truth,' guaranteed by both the Ghost and Revenge. What follows is in some sense predetermined, although Hieronimo, his son Horatio and Bel Imperia as the principal participants in the action are not fully aware of the events in which they participate. At the centre of the tragedy is the contradiction between Hieronimo's public role as 'Knight-Marshal' responsible for the

dissemination of justice and the punishment of crime, and his familial obligation to seek justice for the murder of his son, Horatio.

> Though on this earth justice will not be found,
> I'll down to hell, and in this passion
> Knock at the dismal gates of Pluto's court,
> Getting by force, as once Alcides did,
> A troop of Furies and tormenting hags
> To torture Don Lorenzo and the rest.
>
> (3.13.108–13)

Throughout, the presiding figures interfere, although there is a tension between the pace of the systematic working-out of the plot and Don Andrea's impatience to have his fate in the afterlife, and the reaffirmation of his identity, resolved. At the end of the play the complexities of plot are resolved, revenge is meted out and Don Andrea, Bel Imperia, Horatio and Hieronimo are ushered into a positive afterlife, while Don Lorenzo, Balthazar, Serberine and Pedringano are all relegated to the torments of Hell. In one sense the play works out poetic justice, although the focus is on the suffering of the protagonist Hieronimo, on the violence of which he is ostensibly the cause and on the ultimate ascription of identity that is underwritten by supernatural forces. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, "tragedy does not exist where guilt and expiation balance each other out, where a moral bill of guilt is paid in full." (Gadamer (1993), p. 131) Hieronimo's suffering and the violence that he subsequently enacts upon others, and finally upon himself, is excessive, and is felt by the theatre audience to be so. The audience is drawn into the tragedy through the internal spectatorship of the Ghost of Don Andrea and Revenge, and the excessive energy that is produced is Dionysiac in its chaotic violent potential. Indeed, the play never quite balances the various forces that neither the untimely death of Don Andrea nor the subsequent deaths unleash. Hieronimo "writes" the tragedy of Soliman and Perseda, and the stage spectators are drawn into the play, while both the King of Spain and the Viceroy of Portugal are made to replicate Hieronimo's suffering with the deaths of brother and son respectively. Kyd's play multiplies the ingredients of tragedy and brings it into the early modern period with an emphasis upon 'human' suffering. This tendency gradually becomes more sophisticated in later versions of revenge

tragedy, especially in plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but further in the Jacobean tragedies of John Marston, John Webster, George Chapman, Cyril Tourneur and Thomas Middleton.

RADICAL TRAGEDY

For the last 40 years or so, however, scholars have been engaged in radical rereadings of ancient Greek tragedy, in which dramatists such as Euripides have been associated with the problematising of particular Hellenic institutions and attitudes and subjected to historical analysis. In a parallel movement, a new inflection of Renaissance English tragedy as 'radical' emerged with Jonathan Dollimore's path-breaking *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (1984) that has now gone through three editions (1984, 1989 and 2004) and attacked head-on the claim that literature generally and tragedy in particular were the repositories of universal trans-historical values. Dollimore argues that all of the plays that he discusses share a common theme in that they transgress or challenge "the Elizabethan equivalent of the modern obsession with a *telos* of harmonic integration." (p. 5) He is concerned to analyse the ways in which, in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Renaissance scepticism exploits "Elizabethan/Jacobean fears of cosmic decay ... as a way of destabilising providentialism." (p. 21) In short, the metaphysical order was in crisis, and the "rejection of metaphysical harmony" in Jacobean tragedy "provokes the rejection of aesthetic harmony and the emergence of a new dialectical structure. Coherence comes to reside in the sharpness of definition given *to* metaphysical and social dislocation, not in an aesthetic, religious or didactic resolution *of* it." (p. 39, emphasis in original) Dollimore dismisses the notion that Jacobean tragedy is somehow 'decadent' since he finds in all of the tragedy of the period – but especially in Jacobean tragedy – a serious challenge to "the essentialist concept of 'man' that had hitherto mystified and obscured the real historical condition in which the actual identity of people is rooted" (p. 153). He develops a "materialist analysis" of tragedy and he begins from the claim that while Jacobean tragedy could either incorporate subversive elements into itself, or interrogate what we have come to recognise as ideological values "from within, seizing on and exposing its contradictions

and inconsistencies and offering alternative ways of understanding social and political process," it might also go further to become

> a tragedy which violates those cherished *aesthetic* principles which legislate that the ultimate aim of art is to order discordant elements; to explore conflict in order ultimately to resolve it; to explore suffering in order ultimately to transcend it. All three principles tend to eliminate from literature its socio-political context (and content) finding instead supposedly timeless values which become the *universal* counterpart of man's *essential* nature – the underlying human essence.
>
> (p. 8, emphasis in original)

We may note in passing that this mounted a serious challenge to the "timeless moment" that Lukács identified as the primary objective of tragedy. In the second edition (1989) Dollimore went further to spell out his own methodology by contrasting it with the New Historicism of North American critics such as Stephen Greenblatt and Stephen Mullaney who had suggested that both in the theatre and in wider culture "potentially subversive social elements are *contained* in the process of being *rehearsed*." (Dollimore (1989), p. xxi, emphasis in original) In his third edition (2004) Dollimore went yet another stage further to challenge the claim that "aesthetic didacticism" was complicit with censorship, and that

> such didacticism, far from foreclosing on subversive thought, was often its precondition from a creative, a theatrical and an intellectual perspective. The didactic dénouement does not so much close off that questioning as enable it: it subscribes to the law's letter precisely in order to violate its spirit; far from foreclosing on it, a conforming framework actually licenses a subversive content via the aesthetics of lip-service.
>
> (p. xxiii)

We shall return to the methodology that Dollimore enunciates here in Chapter 5, but for the moment we need to draw attention to it as an important stage in the evolution of critical approaches to Renaissance tragedy.

In his essay on "The Stoicism of Seneca" T.S. Eliot remarked that

> the differences between the fatalism of Greek tragedy, and the fatal-
> ism of Seneca's tragedies, and the fatalism of the Elizabethans, pro-
> ceed by delicate shades; there is a continuity, and there is also a
> violent contrast, when we look at them from far off.
>
> (Eliot (1951), pp. 133–4)

There is, of course, a fatalism at work in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, but
there is also the beginning of a human resistance to forces beyond the pro-
tagonist's control, even though we may detect in Hieronimo's behaviour a
certain tragic irony. Michael Neill notes a tension between the formal
ending of *The Spanish Tragedy* and what he sees as "something sinister in the
vision of an afterworld which is to consist of endless re-enactments of the
drama of retribution we have just seen enacted." (Neill (1998), p. 112).
Neill notes a similar tension in Christopher Marlowe's play *The Tragical
History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1962, c.1589), although
Faustus's low social origins and his rise to intellectual superiority introduce
a series of specific contrasts between the demands of religious belief and the
human desire to challenge them. The Chorus outlines this tension in terms
of an opposition between the force of Faustus's insatiable desire for absolute
mastery and the power of the "heavens" to contain it:

> So much he profits in divinity,
> The fruitful plot of scholarism grac'd,
> That shortly he was grac'd with doctor's name,
> Excelling all, and sweetly can dispute
> In th' heavenly matters of theology;
> Till, swollen with cunning of a self-conceit,
> His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
> And, melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow;
> For, falling to a devilish exercise,
> And glutted now with learning's golden gifts,
> He surfeits upon cursed necromancy;
>
> (ll. 15–25)

The conflict is cast in both biblical and classical terms as one between
the human capacity to exceed limits, and the divine power to impose

limits, a struggle that elicits sympathy for the protagonist even though his attempts to master his earthly existence ultimately prove futile. Here the force of Renaissance humanism collides with the demands of religious faith to produce a fate that Neill argues produces "reduplicated signs of closure" that the Latin tag "Terminat hora diem; terminat Author opus" ['The hour ends the day; the Author ends his work'] aims to reinforce. However, the *sparagmos* of Faustus's dismemberment at the end of the play and the descent of his soul into endless hellish torment raises fundamental questions about the prospect of a compassionate God, and about the delusory power of the freedom of the human will. This 'tearing apart' of Faustus at the end of the play reminds us of the maenads' dismemberment of Pentheus in Euripides' *The Bacchae* and alludes to a ritual dismemberment associated with the celebration of the ancient Greek rites of the god Dionysus. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a revenge play in which the protagonist who seeks to establish his own power of control in the face of divine certainty is caught on the horns of a dilemma: his persistence in upholding his vow to Mephistopheles fuels a despair that will result in ultimate defeat, dismemberment and eternal anguish. What was in ancient Greece a polytheistic culture is subsumed in late Elizabethan English culture into a vivid visual monotheistic conception of the Christian Hell.

Faustus is ripped apart by conflicting forces that pull him in different directions, but there are also more explicit analytical accounts of the dilemma that beset early modern culture. Arguably one of the most radical writers of his age, Fulke Greville, could, in the conclusion of his Senecan closet-drama *Mustapha* (first performed 1609), exhort 'Man' to "Forsake not nature, nor misunderstand her" since "Her mysteries are read without faith's eye-sight. / She speaketh in our flesh, and from our senses / Delivers down her wisdoms to our reason." (Greville (1973), ll. 26–9) There follows another concluding Chorus (*Chorus Sacerdotum*) that is even more explicit in its description of the dilemma of humanity:

Oh wearisome condition of humanity!
Born under one law, to another bound:
Vainly begot, yet forbidden vanity,
Created sick, commanded to be sound:
What meaneth nature by these divers laws?
Passion and reason self-division cause:

Is it the mark or majesty of power
To make offences that it may forgive?
Nature herself doth her own self deflower
To hate those errors she herself doth give.
If nature did not take delight in blood,
She would have made more easy ways to good.
We that are bound by vows, and by promotion,
With pomp of holy sacrifice and rites,
To teach belief in God and stir devotion,
To preach of heaven's wonders and delights:
Yet when each of us in his own heart looks,
He finds the God there far unlike his books.

(ll. 1–24)

Fulke Greville offers us something more than an "anatomie" of the kind of world that the metaphysical poet John Donne describes in his "First Anniversarie" (c.1611) (Donne (1960)). Indeed, his description of the conflict that ravages humanity is fundamentally tragic, and that tragedy resides in a series of constitutive contradictions inscribed in the human heart. We can say that this was one of the consequences of Renaissance humanism, and in Caroline tragedies such as Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (c.1629) the fragility of reason itself is subjected to scrutiny.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* extends the Marlovian preoccupation with the protagonist's humanism and exploits what had become by 1603 a revenge tradition albeit in innovative ways. The 'madness' of Kyd's Hieronimo remains, as do the frustrations that result from the various obstacles placed in his path to the resolution of his dilemma. But instead of the simple conflict between the demands of political office and the desire for justice, the action turns to the contemplation of metaphysical matters. Hamlet cannot fully understand the nature of the task that the Ghost has given him, and he must do so before he can act. In this play the ideology that can protect the monarch against regicide is shown to be completely ineffectual, but the secretiveness of the regicide itself also paralyses the protagonist who is forced, against his better judgement, to act in a temporal world in which "the time is out of joint; O cursed spite? That ever I was born to set it right." (Shakespeare (2006), 1.5.186–7) Hamlet's task, however, leads directly to a consideration of the much larger ontological question of 'being' in the

world, which becomes the central focus of his "To be, or not to be" speech (3.1.55ff.). Here the possibility of the nobility that involves the suffering of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (3.1.57) that will delay action is set against its active counterpart of taking of arms "against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them" (3.1.58–9). Both alternatives may lead to the same conclusion – the fear of consequences – and the conflict is rooted in the regulatory conscience of the protagonist that acts as an obstacle to action:

> Who would fardels bear
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life
> But that the dread of something after death
> (The undiscovered country from whose bourn
> No traveller returns) puzzles the will
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of.
> Thus conscience does make cowards –
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pitch and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action.
>
> (3.1.75–87)

Francis Barker goes a step further to argue that

> At the centre of Hamlet, in the interior of his mystery, there is, in short, nothing. The promised essence remains beyond the scope of the text's signification: or rather, signals the limit of the signification of this world by marking out the site of an absence it cannot fill.
>
> (Barker (1995), p. 33)

But at this point in the play we are offered a clear insight into Hamlet's interiority that emerges gradually in the ensuing events of the play, and in particular, in the later interview with his mother where he lays out his own values and regards his task as a contradictory one: "but heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this, and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister." (Shakespeare (2006), 3.4.171–3).

After a series of false starts, and in the face of the task that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been ordered to carry out, Hamlet returns to Denmark to be threatened by a stock revenger (Laertes), and where Ophelia, deprived of her father's patriarchal control, goes mad. This should tell us something about what has often been described as Hamlet's madness – something which is by his admission early in the play faked, and yet that indicates serious mental disturbance flowing from a parallel source to that of Ophelia: the death of a father. We know *what* happens on board the ship taking Hamlet to England, but what is uncertain is the *effect* that this event has on Hamlet's own psychology. Shakespeare's innovation lies in the emphasis that is placed on Hamlet's psychology at moments such as this, and Hamlet's interactions with Ophelia reflect this clearly.

Immediately before Ophelia's funeral cortège Hamlet muses on the passage of time, human decay and the absolute power of death to level social difference:

> Alexander died. Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth
> to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of
> that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a
> beer-barrel?
>
> (5.1.198–201)

Once the cortège arrives, Hamlet displays what the onstage onlookers regard as madness in his rhetorical outburst of grief for Ophelia. In the following scene he recounts to Horatio the events that happened during the voyage including his own part in emending the letter that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carrying to the English king. The letter is opened and then resealed, an action that is attributed ultimately to a higher power; when Horatio asks how the letter was sealed, Hamlet replies, "Why even in that was heaven ordinant: / I had my father's signet in my purse – / Which was the model of that Danish seal." (5.2.48–50) This is the first explicit acknowledgement that behind the events of the play some supernatural force is at work, and this is reaffirmed by Osric's message challenging Hamlet to a duel with Laertes. The ineffectual attempt on the part of the Lord to persuade him to attend trumps Horatio's misgivings and leads to a bold statement about the operation of "Providence" which provides an explanation for all that

has happened up to this point in the play and suggests a key to the immediate future:

> Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. The readiness is all, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is't to leave betimes. Let be.

<div align="right">(5.2.197–202)</div>

The opaque chiliastic sentiment: "If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now" registers what is uncertain from a human perspective, but the Calvinist understanding of the nature of divine intervention in worldly matters is augmented here with the readiness to act if any opportunity presents itself. If the protagonist fails to act at the appropriate moment then he will miss his opportunity suggesting that there is more at issue than a deterministic God manipulating a human agent. Up to this point in the play there seems to have been an occasional disjunction between opportunity and what it offers to further Hamlet's task. The performance of *The Mousetrap* is indecisive in its effect, and the killing of Polonius is a rash error *but* it leads ultimately to a contrast between Hamlet and Laertes as agents of revenge, and ultimately to the theatrical act ('play') that exposes Claudius's regicide to public view. Similarly, although Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius while he is apparently at prayer he passes it up on the assumption that his father's killer will go to heaven after having asked forgiveness for his sins. However, the play ends with a provisional conclusion since the poison that kills Claudius also kills Hamlet. Justice is served but at a cost, a cost that momentarily reveals the contract between events in the world of the play and the actions of Providence that does, and does not, determine human action. Claudius's regicide is given a biblical explanation as a feature of a post-lapsarian world, whereas the passing of the crown of Denmark to Fortinbras, who in some ways resembles the ethos of Old Hamlet, does nothing to eliminate the threat of future regicide. The tragedy of the play derives from the tension between a humanist imperative to heed a call to action and the internal energy required to carry it out, on the one hand, and those metaphysical forces that seek to impose a pattern upon the behaviour of human subjects whose identities are recognisably within a biblical

framework of the conflict between 'good' and 'evil,' on the other. Two kinds of activity are proposed in the play: the one (Claudius) is a product of evil and of the operation of an anarchic will, and the other (Hamlet) is, albeit largely unwittingly, guided in large part by a providence that ultimately guarantees a measure of success. And yet, as Michael Neill has observed, *Hamlet* is a play that is "permeated with the most intense narrative and interpretative desire," with "a kind of speaking which offers to put a form on the inchoate matter of experience" but where the strategies for doing so "are always under question." (Neill (1998), pp. 218–19)

   Hamlet is a play about action, and eventually the protagonist's "the readiness is all" is a call to action. That pattern is significantly emended in Shakespeare's later play, *King Lear* (c.1605), where the questioning is of a much more sceptical nature, and where an initial action produces intense and extreme suffering. The world of *King Lear* is one in which everything is contingent: a king decides to divide his kingdom, he devises a test in which love is measured and he suffers the consequences of his decision. In this play families are already precarious as structures designed to guarantee order and stability; Gloucester fathers both a legitimate and an illegitimate son, and it is the illegitimate son Edmund who interrogates traditional explanations of human character. Gloucester projects disorder in the human world onto cosmic forces that may harbour secret reasons: "These late eclipses of the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by sequent effects." (Shakespeare (1997), 1.2.103–4) This residual faith in a metaphysical order is countered by Edmund's much more sceptical explanation of human behaviour in which the "goddess" Nature is something other than a book in which we can read some divine plan:

> This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and the stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star. My father

compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous. Fut I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardising.

<div align="right">(1.2.118–33)</div>

This is a different kind of Nature from the one to which Lear appeals once his daughters have begun to turn on him: "Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear: / Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend / To make this creature fruitful." (1.4.266–7) Those who are loyal to Lear seem to persist in the belief that human behaviour is governed by the influence of the planets; for example, Kent's response to Cordelia's reaction to the letters she has received about her father's plight echoes Gloucester's earlier comment:

> It is the stars
> The stars above us govern our conditions,
> Else one self mate and make could not beget
> Such different issues.

<div align="right">(4.3.33–6)</div>

In *Hamlet* the aftermath of death is a question, while in *King Lear* the reality is suffering contingent upon imprudent decisions. While Edmund deliberates over which sister to take, the blind Gloucester is ushered to the shade of a tree pending the outcome of the battle between Cordelia and her adversaries. At the news of defeat Gloucester sinks into despair, but Edgar's response offers a key to the unforeseen consequences of contingency:

> What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
> Their going hence even as their coming hither.
> Ripeness is all. Come on.

<div align="right">(5.2.9–11)</div>

Gloucester's reply: "And that's true too" is a telling comment on the essential passivity of suffering. In the world of *Lear* the norm is not action, but passive endurance in the face of unspeakable horror and desperate disappointment. There is no providence whose secret

operations can provide an explanation for the workings of society or for human identity, nor is there any restoration of a system of checks and balances that will permit a glimpse of what is won and what is lost in the struggle with perfidious natural forces. The gods, who in Greek tragedy could intervene in human affairs, are so remote here as to be imperceptible. And yet, despite all of these questions, critics have still applauded "the moral emphasis and focus which unifies the sprawling structure of Shakespeare's play." (Ornstein (1965), p. 129)

This critical judgement seeks to oppose Shakespeare to one of the most experimental of Jacobean dramatists, John Webster, who in two plays, *The White Devil* (c.1609) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (c.1611) appears, according to Robert Ornstein, "to sacrifice dramatic structure to tragic idea." (p. 129) In a carefully nuanced overview of the context of Jacobean tragedy Ornstein focuses upon its transitional nature. He argues:

> Caught between a dying feudal order and a modern society struggling to be born, perplexed by conflicting interpretations of political fact which they can neither reject nor wholly accept, the Jacobeans seek to moralise about the very political realities which, if admitted, vitiate moral conclusions. They cling to a traditional moral view of of politics even though they sense that medieval ideals are no longer meaningful to their society.
>
> (p. 31)

Ornstein's claim is that the 'moral vision' of Jacobean tragedy is that it has no moral vision, or, at least, not the kind of moral vision that can be excavated from Shakespeare's tragedies. While we may detect elements of *King Lear* in a play such as *The Duchess of Malfi*, in the latter play human action is remote from the shaping force of a metaphysical order. Ornstein seeks to restore a balance with his final claim that "if it is true that the *Duchess* is a threnody for the dying Renaissance, then it is altogether fitting that it should reaffirm that ineffable quality of the human spirit which the Renaissance defined as the dignity of man." (p. 150) Ornstein's hesitant conclusion is, perhaps, a testimony to the difficulty in gauging the shifting tones of Webster's play. The Duchess's Euripidean insistence upon her identity at the moment of her death may well be a reaffirmation of "that ineffable quality of the human spirit,"

although it appears in a play where earlier Bosola, the complex mal-
content villain, had attempted to console Antonio (the Duchess's infer-
ior and her husband) with the thought that birth and origin are no
guarantee of status:

> Search the heads of the greatest rivers in the world, you shall see
> them but bubbles of water. Some would think the souls of princes
> were brought forth by some more weighty cause than those of
> meaner persons – they are deceived, there's the same hand to them:
> the like passions sway them, the same reason that makes a vicar
> go to law for a tithe-pig and undo his neighbours, makes them
> spoil a whole province, and batter down goodly cities with a
> cannon.
>
> (Webster (1964), 2.1.99–107)

Webster's play is full of disarming comments that serve to undercut
the metaphysical sentiments that seem to be dredged up only to be
dismissed. His grotesque inventory of the Old Lady's boudoir and of her
habit of face-painting leads him to a 'meditation':

> What thing is in this outward form of man
> To be beloved? We account it ominous
> If nature do produce a colt, or lamb,
> A fawn, or goat, in any limb resembling
> A man; and fly from't as a prodigy.
> Man stands amaz'd to see his deformity
> In any other creature but himself.
> But in our own flesh, though we bear diseases
> Which have their true names only ta'en from beasts,
> As the most ulcerous wolf, and swinish measle;
> Though we are eaten up of lice and worms,
> And though continually we bear about us
> A rotten and dead body, we delight
> To hide it in rich tissue: all our fear –
> Nay, all our terror – is lest our physician
> Should put us in the ground, to be made sweet.
>
> (2.1.45–60)

Elements of these sentiments are recognisable in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* but in *The Duchess of Malfi* they are coupled with a radical questioning of planetary influence. What we might call a metaphysical order is so far away as to be almost irrelevant to human behaviour. In a truncated version of a Calvinistic axiom Bosola's "'Tis rumoured that she hath had three bastards, but / By whom, we may go read i' th' stars. (3.1.59–60), and Ferdinand's observation that "Why some / Hold opinion, all things are written there" produces an almost throwaway response: "Yes, if we could find spectacles to red them –." (3.1.60–1) In *King Lear* Gloucester works through these sentiments, as indeed does Lear himself, but in Webster they are elements of a post-lapsarian universe in which contingency and accident are the products of human desire.

Webster's Duchess, who is different from either Euripides' or Seneca's Medea, is confronted by a series of obstacles to her marriage to Antonio, although we are never certain of the precise nature of her brother Ferdinand's motives for revenge, and Bosola, as his instrument, changes with the experience of carrying out his employer's wishes. The play raises and then cuts through the commonplace accounts of the anarchy of female desire to create a protagonist capable of great constancy in the face of a bewilderingly changing world. While Antonio can think of 'marriage' as an institution that denies the existence of purgatory: "It locally contains, or heaven or hell; There's no third place in't" (1.1.393–4), the mercurial waiting-woman Cariola offers the following summation of her mistress's behaviour:

> Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman
> Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows
> A fearful madness; I owe her much of pity.
>   (1.1.504–6)

While Webster uses a recognisable Christian and, perhaps, even an Aristotelian vocabulary, the lack of connection with a larger metaphysical order is underscored by the episodic nature of the play's plotting. In a fragmented world, where temporising seems to be the norm, tragedy becomes a question of commitment and constancy, qualities that excite pity and fear in those who are onlookers but who can be drawn into the conflict almost at a moment's notice. Throughout the play Cariola is an observer of the Duchess, and she declares her loyalty to her

but when her life is threatened her declaration of constancy melts away. Similarly, Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, gets sucked into his web of intrigue and is poisoned by what would appear to be an act of devotion. Indeed, the very book that she kisses, in a ritual religious gesture, presumably a bible, kills her and she dies going "I know not whither." (5.2.289)

In Webster's universe justice is swift, indiscriminate and perfunctory and 'conscience' in plays such as *The Duchess of Malfi* is not so much an awareness of a fully operational force that governs behaviour, as something that emerges from the panoply of criminal acts that return to plague the doer. For example, having arrived just after the death of Julia, and having agreed with the Cardinal to kill Antonio, Bosola privately changes his mind, again using traditional religious vocabulary to describe fortuitous and deadly contingency:

> I must look to my footing:
> In such slippery ice-pavements, men had need
> To be frost-nail'd well; they may break their necks else.
> The precendent's here afore me: how this man
> Bears up in blood! Seems fearless! Why, 'tis well:
> Security some men call the suburbs of hell,
> Only a dead wall between.
>
> (5.2.332–8)

Bosola's strategy is now to think about joining Antonio in "a most just revenge" (5.2.343), which symbolically represents "the sword of justice," but the thought invokes the memory of the Duchess: "still methinks the duchess / Haunts me: there, there! – / 'Tis nothing but my melancholy." (5.2.345–7) Two scenes later he kills Antonio in error, an act that seems to exemplify one aspect of Shakespeare's Gloucester's thought that "We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded / Which way please them." (Shakespeare (1997), 5.4.54–5) Antonio completes this thought with: "In all our quest of greatness, / Like wanton boys whose pastime is their care, / We follow after bubbles, blown in th' air." (Webster (1964), 5.4.64–6) Between Bosola and Antonio such utterances have a theatrical rather than a philosophical pedigree, and these gestures towards a metaphysical order are emptied of their significance. In the next scene Bosola underlines the emptiness of what were

originally substantive moral and ethical symbols, when, before stabbing the Cardinal, he reminds him of what 'Justice' has now become: "when thou kill'st thy sister, / Thou took'st from Justice her most equal balance, / And left her naught but her sword." (5.5.39–41) After a frenzy of stabbing the Cardinal dies appealing to Justice: "O Justice! / I suffer now for what hath former been: / *Sorrow is the eldest child of sin*." (5.5.53–5, emphasis added) Of course, this is not 'Justice,' except in a very perfunctory sense, nor is the Cardinal's death in any way tragic. Here death is simply the wages of 'sin.'

For the Cardinal this is the culminating gesture in a religious life totally devoid of meaning. In the aftermath of the killing of Julia he appeals to his "conscience":

> O, my conscience!
> I would pray now: but the devil takes away my heart
> For having any confidence in prayer.
>
> (5.4.26–8)

He begins the following scene puzzling over a theological question, but quickly passes on to dismiss the pressures of his conscience while acknowledging that there is something indistinct that threatens him; this is perhaps not so much 'conscience' in the sense that Hamlet uses the term but a fantasy of past crimes that threaten:

> How tedious is a guilty conscience!
> When I look into the fish-ponds, in my garden,
> Methinks I see a thing arm'd with a rake
> That seems to strike at me.
>
> (5.5. 4–7)

This has nothing of the specificity of Bosola's conscience that is internalised as both his 'melancholy' *and* his memory of the Duchess. Ironically Bosola's intentions completely misfire. Not only that, but "wretched" eminence leaves no history or "fame" behind it: "These wretched eminent things / Leave no more fame behind 'em than should one / Fall in a frost, and leave his print in the snow; / As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts, / Both form and matter." (5.4.113–17) The play ends on a proverbial note suggesting that the only antidote to death is

"integrity of life." (5.5.120) The Duchess's life, lived with integrity is, tragically, all that can be salvaged from a world that has fallen so far from grace that all it can do is mouth the platitudes that in the past have held a universal order together. In a play that sorts into boxes the discursive elements that once held the social, religious and philosophical order together, *The Duchess of Malfi* injects into a situation such as the final moments of Lear a sardonic humour that in some respects antici-pates the world of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the fragmentary, comic universe of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1990).

TRAGEDY AFTER THE RENAISSANCE

Perhaps we should think of early modern tragedy in anatomical terms in which conflict leads to forms of discovery of the disposition of contradictory emotions and their relation to the various cultural forms of displaying, controlling and violating accepted modes of behaviour and belief. Michael Neill connects Vesalius's dramatic dissections of the human body with the larger cultural project of "opening up the hidden truths of the human fabric" thereby associating biological anatomy "with the larger discourse of discovery that found its most characteristic expression in the geographic and cartographic literature of the age." (Neill (1998), pp. 125 and 129) How-ever, once that fervour of investigation subsides, then the major theatrical form in which it is represented begins to lose its immediacy. The increasing vogue for tragi-comedy and comedy began to supplant tragedy in the early seventeenth century, although tragedy itself continued to be regarded as the most serious form of theatrical expression, and following the example of Seneca, was not necessarily linked axiomatically with performance.

   In his *An Apology for Poetry* (c.1583) Sir Philip Sidney had sought to justify the superiority of poetry in relation to philosophy and history. For him, tragedy as a species of poetry may have had a didactic function but its revelatory function was also important; tragedy, he argued,

> Openeth the greatest wounds and sheweth forth the Vlcers that are couered with Tissue; that maketh Kinges feare to be Tyrants, and Tyrants manifest their tirannicall humors; that, with sturring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the vncertainty this world, and vpon how weake foundations guilden roofes are builded.
>
> (Sidney (1904), I.177)

It was Sidney who coined the phrase "sweet violence" to describe the substance of tragedy and it was Sidney who emphasised the Aristotelian unities of "place and time" (p. 197) that he thought many contemporary dramatists had violated. He castigated plays that were "neither right Tragedies, nor right Comedies" because they mingled "Kings and Clownes by head and shoulders, to play a part in maiesticall matters, with neither decencie nor discretion." (p. 199)

Sidney put together a history of poetry that sought to justify its particular elements, offered reasons for its existence and duration and assembled rules that were to last well into the seventeenth century and beyond the Interregnum. The demise of the theatre in the decades leading up to the English Civil War (1642–60) played a large part in halting the popularity of tragedies, although the examples that Sidney had enumerated remained and continued, along with other forms of writing such as epic which he had traced back to Homer and to the ancient Greeks. But as we saw earlier, many of the myths that were represented in ancient Greek tragedy were mediated through Seneca whose formal and rhetorically dense dramas were not intended for the stage. When John Milton wrote his play *Samson Agonistes* (c.1670) he chose to justify it with reference both to Aristotle and the ancient Greek tragedians that Roman writers had used as examples. He repeated Sidney's strictures concerning the "intermixing [of] comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity, or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd, and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratify the people." (Milton (1969), p. 518) And he also upheld the three unities: of time, place and action.

The reduction of tragedy to a set of rules, derived initially from Aristotle's *The Poetics*, became part of a development that sought to regularise rules for poetry in general. Ben Jonson's translation of Horace's *The Art of Poetrie*, unsurprisingly, repeated elements of Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*. Horace's comment on Aeschylus's tragic style demonstrates an ignorance of the role of the ancient Greek satyr play, but insists upon a uniformity of tone:

> For Tragedie is faire,
> And far unworthy to blurt out light rimes;
> But, as a Matrone drawne at solemn times

> To dance, so she should, shamefac'd, differ farre
> From what th'obscene and petulant Satyres are.
>   (Jonson (1965), 8.321)

And he goes on to insist that "where the matter is provided still, / There words will never follow 'gainst their will." (8.349) The question of the propriety of language exercised Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) who asserted that "we generally love to have Reason set out in plain, undeceiving expressions" but he also observed that "the purity of speech and greatness of Empire have in all countries still met together." (Spingarn (1968), II.112–13) Sprat inveighed against the degeneration of "the ornaments of speaking" that are "in open defiance against *Reason*, professing not to hold much correspondence with that, but with its Slaves, *the passions*."(Spingarn (1968), pp. 116–17, emphasis in original) At the end of the century George Granville, Lord Lansdowne's poem "On Unnatural Flights in Poetry," applied these strictures to the subject of poetry, emphasising the proportionality of representation. Granville recognises the importance of "figures" in poetry though he castigated their "intemperant" usage:

> As Veils transparent cover, but not hide,
> Such metaphors appear, when right apply'd;
> When, thro' the phrase we plainly see the sense,
> Truth, when the meaning's obvious, will dispense.
> The Reader, what in Reason's due, believes,
> Nor can we call that false which not deceives.
>   (Spingarn (1968), III.293)

But it is John Dryden's long essay, "Of Dramatic Poesy: An Essay" (1668) (Dryden (1964)) that fixes the critical discourse within which discussions of tragedy are contained as the theatre returned in a much reduced form after the Restoration. Sidney had introduced his *Apology for Poetry* through the frame of a reference to the rhetoric of horsemanship that had forced him to consider himself and his skill as a poet. If this introduction is a little tongue-in-cheek, though referring to an essential element of aristocratic skill, then Dryden's setting of his essay against the background of an imperial conflict, an Anglo-Dutch trade war, suggests that the defence of "dramatic poesy" is as culturally

necessary as the outcome of an international trade war. Something has changed here in that economics has now begun to take precedence over other forces that control human behaviour. In his analysis of French tragedy Lucien Goldmann attributes the change to the growth of individualism:

> Like any other world vision, both rationalistic and empiricist individualism can retain certain rules of conduct which it may refer to as moral or ethical norms. But in fact, whether its ideal is one of power or one of prudence or wisdom, any thorough-going individualism will need to deduce these rules either from the individual's mind or from his heart, since by very definition individualism has abolished any supra-individual reality capable of guiding man and offering him genuinely transcendent norms.
>
> (Goldmann (1977), p. 30)

Dryden's discussion that takes place in a boat on the Thames is between Eugenius (Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst), Crites (Sir Robert Howard), Lisideius (Sir Charles Sedley) and Neander (John Dryden). The issues debated in the essay concern the regularity or otherwise of the rules of English tragedy in the face of criticism from French commentators, questions of tone of the kind that we have seen in earlier commentaries and the extent to which, in dramatic practice, the three Unities are adhered to. Lisideius (Sedley) is persuaded to offer a definition of a play: "*A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind.*" (Dryden (1964), I.5, emphasis in original) Aristotle and Horace provide the yardsticks (1.27) although Horace says nothing about the three Unities, and Aristotle only mentions two of them (time and action but not place). Moreover, what for Aristotle was an empirical description of actual tragedies is transformed for the seventeenth century and beyond into a set of 'rules' against which particular examples are to be measured. Eugenius (Charles Sackville) refuses to accept that *Medea* belonged to Seneca on the grounds that it did not have sufficient gravity ("omne genus scripti gravitate tragaedia vincit" ['tragedy surpasses every other kind of writing in gravity']) (1.41) Lisideius (Sedley) compares French tragedies with their English counterparts and observes that Corneille and his contemporaries

are superior because they observe a version of the three Unities (1.44) and they preserve a unity of tone. He notes that "the French avoid the tumult which we are subject to in England by representing duels, battles, and the like; which renders our stage too like the theatres where they fight prizes." (1.50–1) In a sentiment that harks back to the ancient Greek theatre he urges that the representation of death on the stage is likely to elicit laughter:

> I have observed that, in all our tragedies, the audience cannot forbear laughing when the actors are to die; 'tis the most comic part of the whole play. All *passions* may be lively represented on the stage, if to the well-writing of them the actor supplies a good commanded voice, and the limbs move easily, and without stiffness; but there are many *actions* which can never be imitated to a just height: dying especially is a thing which none but a Roman gladiator could naturally perform on the stage, when he did not imitate or represent, but naturally do it; and therefore it is better to omit the representation of.
>
> (1.51, emphasis in original)

This speaks to the resistance to the mixture of tragedy and comedy to which Neander (Dryden) had some objection (1.58) although his defence of "underplots" is given a scientific support in the suggestion that they may progress underneath "the motion of the *primum mobile*, in which they are contained." (1.59) Shakespeare is acknowledged to be supreme, but Jonson appears to have been the more influential, and the essay concludes with an analysis of Jonson's comedy *The Silent Woman.*

By the end of the seventeenth century there was a sea change in the ethos of tragedy. The radical separation of religion from philosophy and the gradual emphasis upon the power of reason serve to diminish the social, intellectual and political tensions that had informed a dialectic that was crucial to the formulation of tragic conflict. The result was a simplification of the ethos of tragedy as a dramatic form and a tendency simply to imitate, adapt and iron out its complexities. According to Granville, even Dryden himself was not free from this:

> *Dryden* himself, to please a frantick Age,
> Was forc'd to let his judgment stoop to Rage;

> To a wild Audience he conform'd his voice,
> Comply'd to Custom, but not err'd thro' Choice.
>   (Spingarn (1968) III.294, emphasis in original)

All For Love (1677), Dryden's rewriting of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, offers a telling example (Dryden (1962)). Gone are the complex Shakespearean perspectives, and the shuttling between Rome and Egypt, with the emphasis now on a simple choice between "the world" (which is the Roman world of politics and military prowess) and "Love," which translates into an opposition between 'reason' and 'passion.' In an early conversation between Ventidius, Antony's general, and Alexas, Cleopatra's eunuch, Ventidius makes the contrast clear:

> Oh, she has decked his ruin with her love,
> Led him in golden bands to gaudy slaughter,
> And made perdition pleasing: She has left him
> The blank of what he was.
>
>   (1.1. 21)

Both Antony and Cleopatra reinforce this view a little later in the play, although they accept full responsibility for their own actions, thereby diminishing the pressure of any tragic forces beyond their immediate control. When the lovers meet in Act 2 both acknowledge that they must separate, but they both acknowledge that they themselves are in total control of their actions:

> *Cleo.* Is this a meeting?
> Then we must part.
> *Ant.* We must.
> *Cleo.* Who says we must?
> *Ant.* Our own hard fates.
> *Cleo.* We make those fates ourselves
> *Ant.* Yes, we have made them; we have loved each other
> Into our mutual ruin.
>
>   (2.1. 34)

Even when comparing themselves with classical deities such as Mars and Venus (Act 3, scene 1) these are little more than gestures of self-

delusion, thereby placing the focus ultimately on the question of 'character.' Ventidius's Roman perspective produces a residual analysis of Antony's character that he attributes to "the Gods" in which 'virtue' and 'crime,' rather like the dialectic between 'reason and passion,' are the determining features:

> *Vent.* I am waning in his favour, yet I love him;
> I love this man, who runs to meet his ruin;
> And sure the gods, like me, are fond of him:
> His virtues lie so mingled with his crimes,
> As would confound their choice to punish one,
> And not reward the other.
>
> (3.1.41)

Shakespeare's association of Egypt with creativity – both fecundity *and* poetry – is absent in Dryden's adaptation, indeed, at one point Cleopatra dismisses the praise of her beauty as "Mere poetry." (4.1. 54) Also, the suggestion that the passionate Cleopatra is attracted to Dolabella results in Antony harbouring a form of jealousy, aided and abetted by his wife Octavia and Ventidius, which resembles, and verbally echoes, the Claudio of Shakespeare's comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*:

> *Ant.* What woman was it, whom you heard and saw
> So playful with my friend?
> Not Cleopatra?
> *Vent.* Even she, my lord.
> *Ant.* My Cleopatra?
> *Vent.* Your Cleopatra;
> Dolabella's Cleopatra, every man's Cleopatra.
>
> (4.1. 59)

The quotation itself, echoing and paraphrasing aspects of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, reduces the status of Cleopatra who, unlike Shakespeare's innocent Hero, seems unable to contain her own passion as a reflex against Roman 'reason.' Even when Charmian appeals to 'heaven' against the punishment of 'virtue' as an indication "that chance rules all above. / And shuffles with a random hand the lots, / Which man is forced to draw" (5.1. 67), or when Cleopatra invites the gods to

"bear witness," there is something empty, or unmotivated in these suggestions that forces beyond human control are at work. Granville's strictures are adequately borne out by the unevenness of Dryden's manipulation of the elements of tragedy.

Nahum Tate's adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1699) does much to expose the post-Restoration aesthetics of tragedy and, in particular, important changes of literary taste. In a prefatory letter to his "esteem'd friend, Thomas Boteler" Tate offers the following rationale:

> 'Twas my good Fortune to light on one Expedient to rectify what was wanting in the Regularity and Probability of the Tale, which was to run thro' the whole, as love betwixt Edgar and Cordelia; that never changed word with each other in the Original. This renders Cordelia's Indifference and her father's passion in the first Scene probable. It likewise gives Countenance to Edgar's Disguise making that a generous Design that was before a poor Shift to save his life. The Distress of the Story is evidently heightned by it; and it particularly gave Occasion of a New Scene or Two, of more Success (perhaps) than Merit. This method necessarily threw me on making the Tale conclude in a Success to the innocent distrest Persons: Otherwise I must have encumbered the Stage with dead Bodies, which Conduct makes many Tragedies conclude with unseasonable jests.
>
> (Tate (1699), sig.A2r)

The matter of poetic justice, combined with a distaste for the representation of violence in the final stages of the tragedy, suggest a significant shift in the aesthetics of tragedy and a commitment to a series of 'rules' that were applied critically to tragic form as the eighteenth century progressed. Indeed, Samuel Johnson in a note on *King Lear* in 1765 could observe critically that "Shakespeare has suffered the virtues of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of the chronicles." (Johnson (1969), p. 126)

By the end of the nineteenth century the pressures upon human behaviour had changed considerably as, indeed, did ways of representing them. We shall revisit some of these issues in Chapter 5, but in Chapter 4 we turn to the link between tragedy and philosophy.

4

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TRAGEDY

So far we have considered tragedy as a theatrical form, although we should remember that Aristotle was, among other things, a philosopher. Thus, the term fulfils a dual function: as a particular kind of drama, *and* as an ontological category. In his introduction to *The Philosophy of Tragedy* (2013) Julian Young argues that philosophers have located 'tragic effect' "either on the level of sense and emotion, or on the level of intellect and cognition." This dichotomy corresponds to the philosophical distinction between empirical experience, on the one hand, and, on the other, a recognition of the independent operation of reason. We have observed earlier that tragedy as a dramatic form affords a certain kind of pleasure, but Young notes that it also posits "the acquisition of some kind of *knowledge*." (p. 1, emphasis in original) It is this knowledge that permits a bridge between dramatic form and philosophy, and this connection has been established in different ways, and with different consequences, since Plato and Aristotle. Classical scholars, leaning towards history and sociology have observed that the crisis that produced Greek tragedy was generated by a tension between different forms of government in the city state of ancient Athens; and as we observed in Chapter 3, it was the tension between religion and the secular world that provided the impetus for much Renaissance

tragedy. In his magisterial account of the history of *Antigones* (1986), George Steiner makes an important general point about the connection between tragedy and philosophy when he notes that: "Because it isolates and enacts summary moments in human uncertainty, because it stresses behaviour to the breaking-point of disaster – disaster being the final logic of action – tragedy has, pre-eminently, attracted philosophic 'use'." (p. 103) The late-seventeenth and the early-eighteenth centuries preoccupied themselves with adherence to the 'rules' of tragedy, an offshoot of the more general philosophical preoccupation with the rules that governed morality and ethics in relation to 'action,' and that extended to the emerging sphere of aesthetics. But the emphasis upon the faculty of 'reason' gradually attenuated the impact of the 'tragic effect.' More recently Simon Critchley has mounted a spirited challenge to the dualism of reason/myth, especially in its Nietzschean guise, in his insistence that "Tragedy is not some Dionysian celebration of the power of ritual and the triumph of myth over reason." (Critchley (2019) p. 119)

Samuel Johnson's *The Tragedy of Irene* pinpoints this in the dialogue between the protagonist Irene and her fellow Greek companion Aspasia both of whom are captives at the court of Mahomet, emperor of the Turks. Here Irene formulates a traditional account of the relationship between the exceptional tragic figure, the human world and the metaphysical order:

> Thus meaner spirits with Amazement mark
> The varying Seasons. And revolving Skies,
> And ask, what guilty Pow'rs rebellious Hand
> Rolls with eternal Toil the pond'rous Orbs;
> While some Archangel nearer to Perfection,
> In easy State presides o'er all their motions,
> Directs the Planets with a careless Nod,
> Conducts the Sun and regulates the Spheres.
>
> (Johnson (1749), p. 44)

Aspasia's response is to dismiss this account of a transcendentally predetermined world in favour of the material, moral and interrogative voice of 'reason' which introduces a political and potentially tragic tension into the discussion:

Well may'st thou hide in Labyrinths of Sound
The Cause that shrinks from Reason's powerful Voice,
Stoop from thy Flight, trace back th' entangled Thought,
And set the glitt'ring Fallacy to view.
Not Pow'r I blame, but Pow'r obtain'd by Crime,
Angelic Greatness is Angelic Virtue.

(p. 44)

This dismantling of a metaphysical order underpinned by a Christian theology raises questions concerning the nature of human agency, and implies a projection of 'Virtue' from its earthly location to a kind of moral absolute ('Angelic greatness'). The scepticism that produces this tension, and that contributes to Aspatia's conception of human freedom that transcends her captive state, is further extended in Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1793), where he asserts dismissively that "The Christian theory is little else than the idolatry of the ancient Mythologists, accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue; and it yet remains to reason and philosophy to abolish the ambitious fraud." (Paine (2015), p. 11) For Paine the Christian narrative is one of a number of "human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit" (p. 8), and as a 'story' it proves unable to stand up to the rigorous interrogation of 'reason' and 'philosophy.'

But what of those narratives that do not disguise their own fictionality, that engage a broad range of human emotions and that exist alongside those that seek to define the human condition? This is one of the problems that the Scottish, eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume (1711–76) confronts in his short essay "Of Tragedy." His comment on the effect of some of Cicero's epilogues upon readers prompts the question: "What is it then, which in this case raises a pleasure from the bosom of uneasiness, so to speak: and a pleasure, which still retains all the features and outward symptoms of distress and sorrow?" Hume's answer is that some sort of 'conversion' takes place, as sorrowful *content* "receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty." (Hume (1757), p. 3) Young, preoccupied with the philosophical basis of tragedy, is convinced that Hume had not read Aristotle's *The Poetics* since he seems to have been unaware of the notion of *catharsis* (Young (2013), pp. 58–9). The following is Hume's account of the relations between 'pity', 'fear' and 'delight' that tragedy smoothes out:

> The soul, being, at the same time, roused by passion, and charmed by eloquence, feels on the whole a strong movement, which is altogether delightful. The same principle takes place in tragedy: with this addition, that tragedy is an imitation: and imitation is always of itself agreeable. This circumstance serves still farther to smooth the motions of passion, and convert the whole feeling into one uniform and strong enjoyment.
>
> (p. 192)

Here the quasi-medical account of the cathartic effect is transferred into the realm of an aesthetics that for Hume can be explained empirically. The effect on an audience is intensified by replicating the delay of parts of the narration that is the experience of the dramatic character in order "first to excite his curiosity and impatience before you let him into the secret." (p. 194) This is a far cry from Aristotle's *peripeteia* in the trajectory of the narrative where the reversal is related to the *action* and not to *character*; and the example Hume chooses of Iago's "artifice" in intensifying Othello's jealousy in Shakespeare's play, along with other stimuli such as "absence" which is "a great source of complaint among lovers" (p. 195), is pinpointed as the source of pain and pleasure that an audience is invited to experience mimetically. Hume notes:

> The force of imagination, the energy of expression, the power of numbers, the charms of imitation; all these are naturally, of themselves delightful to the mind: And when the object presented lays hold of some affection, the pleasure still rises upon us, by the conversion of this subordinate movement into that which is predominant. The passion, though, perhaps, naturally, and when excited by the simple appearance of a real object, it may be painful; yet is so smoothed, and softened, and mollified, when raised by the finer arts, that it affords the highest entertainment.
>
> (Hume (1757), p. 5)

Here the 'finer arts' are "the charms of imitation," and their combined effect is to 'soften' and 'mollify' what *in reality* may be painful, with the result that pain is transformed into the pleasure that is stimulated by the recognition of artistic imitation.

   Hume's account, of the smoothing and softening of the painful that is the result of the pleasure associated with artistic imitation, is a far cry

from Aristotle's *catharsis*, but it is also qualitatively different from Edmund Burke's explanation of the sublime and the beautiful in his "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful". Burke locates the sublime in nature and the effect that it has on the observer "is Astonishment" which is "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." (Burke (2015), p. 47) Burke continues:

> In this case, the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect.
>
> (p. 47)

This momentary recognition of a feature of 'nature,' familiar to Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, exceeds the capacity of human reason in order to produce terror and "admiration, reverence and respect." In the preceding sections on "Sympathy" (sections X111–X1V), in a very short section "Of the Effects of TRAGEDY" (Part 1, section XV) and in the section that follows on "Imitatio" (section XV1), Burke, who had read Aristotle, rejects Hume's account of the ameliorating effects of tragedy as imitation, to ask "how we are affected by the feelings of our fellow creatures in circumstances of real distress" (section X1V). (p. 39) However, he carefully distinguishes between "a simple pain in the reality" and "a delight in the representation." (p. 40) The sympathy and pity that Hume downplays, Burke highlights here:

> It is certain that it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of any imminent hazard before I can take delight in the suffering of others, real or imaginary, or indeed anything else from any cause whatsoever. But then it is a sophism to argue from thence, that the immunity is the cause of my delight either on these or on any occasions. No one can distinguish such a cause of satisfaction in his own mind I believe; nay when we do not suffer any very acute pain, nor are exposed to any imminent danger of our lives, we can feel for others, whilst we suffer

> ourselves; and often then most when we are softened by affliction; we
> see with pity even distresses which we would accept in the place of
> our own.
>
> (p. 41)

For Burke imitation has a heuristic value in that it is the means by
which we acquire knowledge. (p. 42) He is careful to avoid any accu-
sation of *Schadenfreude* or delight in the suffering of others, urging us to
relieve their suffering thereby relieving ourselves. This is generated by
"an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our con-
currence." (p. 40) What Burke collapses into an "instinct" Aristotle
would have attributed to a culminating balance that allows the spectator
a momentary glimpse of a metaphysical order, notwithstanding the
exemplary suffering of the protagonist.

TRAGEDY AND THE SUBLIME

By the mid-eighteenth century what was originally a concept that dealt
principally with elevated literary style, the sublime, became a means of
describing the experience of nature as well as art. Burke saw the concept
of 'infinity' as a source of the sublime:

> Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful
> horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sub-
> lime. There are scarce any things which can become the objects of
> our senses that are really, and in their own nature infinite. But the eye
> not being able to perceive the bounds of many things. They seem to
> be infinite, and they produce the same effect as if they were really so.
> We are deceived in like manner.
>
> (Burke (2015), p. 60)

We saw that for Burke "sympathy in the distresses of others" as in tra-
gedy was contingent upon the recognition that it was an imitation, and
'pity' could be transformed from terror into delight "when it does not
press too close … because it arises from love and social affection." (p.
39) Burke's account of the sublime reconceptualises Aristotle's 'pity' and
'fear' in such a way that at one extreme they produce Gothic terror, but

at the other they become parts of an aesthetic pleasure that is equally applicable to art and Nature.

Although he made only passing comments on tragedy, the Enlightenment German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) produced an account of the sublime as part of his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) in which he associated it with "the supersensible" as "pure intellectual finality;" without this emotions are reduced "only to *motion*, which we welcome in the interests of good health." (Kant (1992), p. 126, emphasis in original) This is very different from Aristotle's quasi-medical account of catharsis. For Kant, there is a clear difference between "the restoration of the equilibrium of the various vital forces within us" (p. 126), on the one hand, and, on the other, the sublime that "must in every case have reference to our *way of thinking*, i.e. to maxims directed to giving the intellectual side of our nature and the ideas of reason supremacy over sensibility." (p. 127, emphasis in original) Without this clear distinction the spectator of a tragedy may delude him/ herself into thinking that the experience will improve him/her when, in fact, "he is merely glad at having got well rid of the feeling of being bored." (p. 127) Kant goes on to acknowledge the link in tragedy between the sublime and "fine art" that "may be brought into union with beauty in a *tragedy in verse, a didactic poem,* or an *oratorio*, and in this combination fine art is even more artistic." (p. 190, emphasis in original) In an observation that to some extent anticipates T.S. Eliot's critique of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as lacking an 'objective correlative' to represent the magnitude of the protagonist's predicament, Kant defines the category of "the monstrous" as

> the mere presentation of a concept which is almost too great for presentation, i.e. borders on the relatively monstrous; for the end to be attained by the presentation of a concept is made harder to realize by the intuition of the object being almost too great for our faculty of apprehension.
>
> (pp. 100–1)

For Kant, the mathematical realisation of the magnitude of an object contaminates the human subject's judgement by attaching to the object a teleological or purposive element that taints it. He concludes that: "A pure judgement upon the sublime, must, however, have no end

belonging to the Object as its determining ground, if it is to be aesthetic and not to be tainted with any judgement of understanding or reason." (p. 101)

Joshua Billings outlines the wider philosophical objective of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* but he emphasises that it "in no way anticipates tragedy as the privileged object of a philosophy of art." (Billings (2014), pp. 78–9) (Kant (1992), p. 6) What changed at the end of the eighteenth century to give tragedy precedence in philosophical discussions of aesthetics? But before we answer that question we need to consider briefly what Raymond Williams has called "the secularisation of tragedy." (Williams (1966) p. 26)

SECULARISING TRAGEDY

Williams notes that from the late seventeenth century onwards "the moving force of tragedy was now quite clearly a matter of behaviour, rather than either a metaphysical condition or a metaphysical fault." He claims that the Aristotelian notion of *hamartia* had hitherto "been contained within a description of action," and was therefore "related to the action, which was in itself a general mutability." (Williams (1966), p. 26) This leads Williams to the conclusion that:

> The moral question, of the nature and therefore the effect of a tragic action, becomes a question in abstracted human nature: that is to say, not an enquiry into a specific response which must then necessarily include the action to which the response is made, but an attempt to find reasons for an assumed general form of human behaviour.
>
> (p. 27)

It is also Williams' claim that the tragic hero was thereby "remade in the image of the tragic spectator, whose assumed division of feeling [of 'pleasure' and 'grief'] was projected as a tragic cause." (p. 27) What Williams identifies as "question in abstracted human nature" becomes a vehicle for engaging tragedy as a form of knowledge. (p. 27)

Williams argues, in a way that echoes Peter Szondi (2002), that Greek tragedy and Renaissance tragedy including Shakespeare were reinterpreted by the pressing concerns of eighteenth-century neo-classicism; or, in other words, it was a manifestation of "the familiar case of

selecting and re-selecting a tradition." (Williams (1966), p. 29) Williams focuses on the German dramatist and philosopher, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), who rejected neo-classicism and defended Shakespeare, and on the German Enlightenment and the European Romantic movement's investments in the Greek-Elizabethan identity. (p. 29) The result was the emergence of bourgeois tragedy that recast Greek tragic narratives in a contemporary idiom, and that represented what Terry Eagleton regards as part of "an ideological assault on the traditional order by its middle-class humanitarian opponents" (Eagleton (2003), p. 160); indeed, Eagleton goes a stage further to dismiss "pity and tenderness" as "domestic and bourgeois" and to identify "this swooning and snivelling" as "a potent critique of upper-class barbarism and *hauteur.*" Like Williams, though in a much more aggressive vein, Eagleton attributes to Lessing "a full-blooded historical revisionism which sidelines neoclassical drama, stomping ground of the frigid nobility, and redraws the lines of tradition from the Greeks to Shakespeare and straight to the middle-class present." (p. 160)

In addition to a revision of the tradition of tragedy, the extension of the discussions of form into the realm of knowledge production, on the one hand, and the need to justify its peculiar link with the historically overdetermined pleasure and unpleasure of the spectator as part of an aesthetic experience, on the other, are central to this shift. The history of Western drama has always involved some kind of return to Greek tragedy as a model, but the eighteenth-century appropriation of it into systems of rules and subjecting it to the aesthetic category of 'taste' initiated and directed enquiry into political and social (as well as philosophical and psychological) domains. In his "Introduction on Taste" in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Edmund Burke states:

> It is known that the Taste (whatever it is) is improved exactly as we improve our judgement, *by extending our knowledge*, by a steady attention to our object, and by frequent exercise. They who have not taken these methods, if their Taste decides quickly, it is always uncertainly, and their quickness is owing to their presumption and rashness, and not to any sudden irradiation that in a moment dispels all darkness from their minds.
>
> (Burke (2015), p. 26, emphasis added)

It is in the sections on "Sympathy" (section X111) and its "Effects" (section X1V), "Imitation" (section XV1) and "Ambition" (section XV11) that Burke displays a partisan historical awareness of the context of tragedy and the assimilation of its effects into the psychology of the spectator. For him sympathy involves "how we are affected by the feelings of our fellow creatures in circumstances of real distress." (p. 39) He thinks that art *and* history can induce similar emotional effects, and that our responses depend on what it is that stimulates them, but he shapes a modern argument *through* the prism of ancient Greek or Roman examples, fictional and historical:

> The prosperity of no empire, nor the grandeur of no king, can so agreeably affect in the reading, as the ruin of the state of Macedon, and the distress of its unhappy prince. Such a catastrophe touches us in history as the destruction of Troy in fable. Our delight in cases of this kind, is very greatly heightened, if the sufferer be some excellent person who sinks under an unworthy fortune. Scipio and Cato are both virtuous characters; but we are more deeply affected by the violent death of the one, and the ruin of the great cause he adhered to, than with the deserved triumphs and uninterrupted prosperity of the other; for terror is a passion which always produced delight when it does not press too close, and pity is a passion accompanied with pleasure, because it arises from love and social affection.
>
> (p. 39)

To some extent Burke gives his own political situatedness away in his comment on 'ambition,' as a gift from God that arises from "the contemplation of his excelling his fellows in something deemed valuable amongst them." (p. 43) This God-given freedom to excel exposes the political limitations of 'imitation' since imitating others prevents "improvement." (pp. 42–3) Already, politically we are here drifting away from some of the classical ingredients of tragic form, while Burke continues to identify what are ostensibly the Aristotelian effects of 'pity' and 'fear' (recast as parts of the 'sublime') as important elements of tragic experience.

SCHILLER ON TRAGEDY

The German dramatist and philosopher, Friedrich Schiller, a near contemporary of Immanuel Kant, produced both an essay "On the

Sublime" and an essay "On the Tragic Art," both of which were imbued with a Kantian philosophical vocabulary. In "On the Sublime" Schiller begins by asserting that "man is the being who wills" (Wertz and Wertz (1990), p. 135) but he immediately qualifies this by observing that man can overcome everything but death whereby he is subjected to the power of a Nature that he cannot control. How, therefore, Schiller asks, can Man overcome the violence of Nature? Either he can oppose "violence with violence" *or* "*ideally*, when he steps out of Nature and so, in regard to himself annihilates the concept of violence." (p. 135, emphasis in original.) He admits that this will only take Man so far since what he calls this "physical culture" compromises Man's freedom. Schiller goes on to ask:

> He ought, however, to be Man without exceptions, therefore in no case suffer something *against* his will. Can he therefore no longer oppose to the physical forces a proportional physical force, so nothing else remains left to him, in order to suffer no violence, than: *to annul; altogether a relation*, which is so disadvantageous to him and *to annihilate as a concept* the violence, which he must in fact suffer. To annihilate violence as a concept, however, is called nothing other, than to voluntarily subject oneself to the same. The culture, which makes him apt thereto, is called the moral.
>
> (p. 137, emphasis in original)

Schiller goes on to argue that the morally educated man develops "feelings for beauty" that make him, "up to a certain degree, independent of nature as a power." (p. 138) The beautiful and the good are not simply the products of human longing, but are the results of a demand that they should be thus. Schiller concludes that:

> That frame of mind, which is indifferent as to whether the beautiful and good and perfect exist, but with rigorous sternness desires, that the existing objects be good, beautiful, and perfect, is called preferably great and sublime, because it contains all realities of the beautiful character, without sharing its limits.
>
> (p. 138)

Schiller's further elucidation of the features of the sublime bear a striking resemblance to the dynamics of tragedy in his attempt to negotiate:

> a combination of *woefulness*, which expresses itself in its highest
> degree as a shudder, and of *joyfulness*, which can rise up to enrapture,
> and, although it is not properly pleasure, is yet widely preferred to
> every pleasure by fine souls.
>
> (p. 139, emphasis in original)

The sublime, gives access to an "absolute moral capacity, which is
bound to no natural condition" and as a result "procures for us an exit
from the sensuous world, wherein the beautiful would gladly always
keep us imprisoned." (p. 140) This absolute moral capacity fulfils the
function of a Kantian "*a priori* principle" that makes possible "the
transition from the realm of the concept of nature to that of the concept
of freedom." (Kant 1992, p. 38) It is at the level of conceptualisation
that a model of the tragic is fused with philosophical enquiry.

   In "On the Tragic Art" Schiller identifies a "state of passion in itself,
independently of the good or bad influence of its object on our mor-
ality," which he links to a particular human experience:

> Experience teaches us that painful affections are those which
> have the most attraction for us, and thus that the pleasure we take
> in an affection is precisely in an inverse ratio to its nature. It
> is a phenomenon common to all men, that sad, frightful things,
> even the horrible, exercise over us an irresistible seduction,
> and that in presence of a scene of desolation and of terror we
> feel at once repelled and attracted by two equal forces.
>
> (Schiller (n.d.), p. 346)

This describes the sublime, but it also describes the spectator's experi-
ence of tragedy. He regards this "irresistible seduction" as a human
instinct, but in the case of "a well-bred man" it is compensated by a
"painful strength of compassion [that] carries the day over this instinct,
or it is kept under by the laws of decency." (p. 347) However, Schiller
distinguishes clearly between the experience of pain produced by the
"struggle of a heart drawn asunder between its inclinations or contrary
duties" which "is a cause of misery to him who experiences it," and the
"delight" of "the person who is a mere spectator." (p. 347) He goes on
to locate "the displeasure we feel in disagreeable affection" in the ten-
sion between "our sensuous faculty" and our "moral faculty;" and to

state that "the degree of liberty that may prevail in the affections depends on the proportion between the moral nature and the sensuous nature of man." (p. 348) The sensuous faculty is the seat of the ego and of 'individuality' whereas "a moral philosophy" draws our attention "constantly towards general laws [and] weakens in us the feeling of our own individuality." For Schiller tragic conflict involves a struggle between the "sublime state of mind [that] is the lot of strong philosophic minds" and "the egotistical instinct" which these minds "have learned to bridle." (p. 349) The cultivated spectator in this account is culturally privileged, and the struggle that he/she witnesses bears a close resemblance to that which Sophocles depicts in his *Antigone*, a play that has consistently attracted commentators since the eighteenth century.

Schiller admits that the spectator responds to "the vividness and force of the ideas awakened in our imagination, the moral excellence of the suffering persons [and] the reference to himself of the person feeling pity." (p. 350) The sympathetic pleasure we take in an emotion is "because the attack made on our sensibility is precisely the condition necessary to set in motion that quality of mind of which the activity produces the pleasure we feel in sympathetic affections." Thus, the experience of vicarious suffering is an activity that stimulates "the free exercise of reason" that is "independent in its moral acts" because it speaks to and activates "that quality of mind of which the activity produces the pleasure we feel in sympathetic affections." Tragedy, we are told, stimulates "the pleasure of pity," but at the same time it awakens "that moral power in us [that] is superior to the power of the senses." (p. 352) Schiller's 'philosophical' subject is possessed of sufficient intellectual refinement to recognise and control the world of the senses, and to be able to make fine moral discriminations that it is the business of tragedy to stimulate. He cites Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an example of a tragic protagonist who produces a weakened response from the spectator because our interest in Lear "is sensibly lessened by the circumstance that this aged man, in his second childhood, so weakly gave up his crown, and divided his love among his daughters with so little discernment." (p. 353) Thus the balance between Lear's 'suffering' and what Schiller calls, more generally, "moral activity" is not well managed. For Schiller what is most important is the tension between 'morality' and 'instinct,' between that which gives the spectator access to the realm of the sublime and the world of the senses. On the issue of

'action' Schiller has little to add to Aristotle: "tragedy is the imitation of a complete action;" he also distinguishes between tragedy and 'history' where the latter is constrained. This is a version of the distinction between 'poetry' and 'history' that Sidney had observed in his "Apology for Poesy" (1576).

HEGEL ON TRAGEDY

In the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) tragedy occupies a particular place, situated initially within the geographical location of Athens, and is indicative of a particular moment in the larger pattern of world history. Although references to tragedy can be found throughout Hegel's philosophical writings, it is in *The Philosophy of the Fine Arts* (Hegel (n.d.)) and the *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (Hegel (1993)) that it is addressed at length. Hegel's definition of 'dramatic action' points in two directions: firstly it is "confined to the simple and undisturbed execution of a definite purpose," and secondly it "depends throughout on conditions of collision, human passion and characters, and leads therefore to actions and reactions, which in their turn call for some further resolution of conflict and disruption." (Hegel (1975) pp. 2–3)

   This definition of dramatic action has become known as Hegelian dialectic, although the philosophical concept itself can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy and to Plato, where it simply means 'conversation' that permits an exchange of views relating to a particular topic. In Hegel the term becomes part of a method designed ultimately to uncover "pure thought." This is how the Russian Marxist philosopher, Alexandre Kojève, puts it in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*:

> The dialectical movement is a movement of human thought and discourse; but the reality itself which one thinks of and of which one talks is in no way dialectical. Dialectic is but a *method* of philosophical research and exposition. And we see, by the way, that the method is *dialectical* only because it implies a negative or negating element: namely the antithesis which *opposes* the thesis in a verbal *fight* and calls for an *effort* of demonstration, an effort, moreover. indistinguishable from a *refutation*. There is truth properly so-called – that is scientific or philosophic truth, or better, dialectical or synthetic

truth – only when there has been discussion or dialogue – that it, antithesis *negating* a thesis.

<div align="right">(Kojève (1996), p. 181, emphasis in original)</div>

This seems a little abstract, but if we align Hegel's 'method' with his own philosophy of history, and with his account of aesthetics, and then with his privileging of ancient Greek culture – and particularly its plastic and dramatic arts – then his focus on tragedy becomes clearer.

   To begin with, in *The Philosophy of History* Hegel observed that what he called "the rudiments of Greek Culture" depended upon "the physical condition of the country [that] does not exhibit a characteristic unity" and therefore does not "exercise a powerful influence over the inhabitants." (Hegel (1956), p. 233)

> In the face of the break-up of power into fragmentary forms, men's attention is more largely directed to themselves and to the extension of their immature capabilities. Thus, we see the Greeks – divided and separated from each other – thrown back upon their inner spirit and personal energy, yet at the same time most variously excited and cautiously circumspect.

<div align="right">(p. 233)</div>

For Hegel the Greek 'character' is defined as "*Individuality conditioned by Beauty*, which is produced by Spirit, transforming the merely Natural into an expression of its own being." (p. 238, emphasis in original) Within this larger philosophical context the Aristotelian notion of the primacy of 'action' in tragedy is reversed in Hegel, so that action issues from 'character':

> Action is here the executed will, which as such is at the same time *recognised*, recognised, that is, not merely in its origin and point of departure from the inner feeling, but also in respect to its ultimate purpose. In other words, all that issues from the action, issues so far as the personality in question is concerned, from himself, and reacts thereby on his personal character and its circumstances. This constant relation of the entire complexus of external condition to the inwardness itself of the self-realized and self-realizing individuality, who is at once the basis and assimilating force of the entire process,

> marks the point where dramatic poetry falls in line with the truly lyrical principle.
>
> (p. 5, emphasis in original)

Ancient Greece was, to use Terry Eagleton's words, "a society which Hegel likens to an artefact, where a spontaneous knowledge of the whole was still routinely available." (Eagleton (1990), p. 141) Or, to put it another way, moments of self-realisation and self-consciousness, which, according to Hegel, it is the purpose of philosophy to identify, appear at particular transitional conjunctures in human history, hence the focus on ancient Athens and its tragedies and the English Renaissance. At the level of what Hegel styles "dramatic personality" the persona is emphatically not "allegorical" but a unity that simultaneously displays a "permeating individuality" or 'spirit,' while incorporating 'deed(s)' and behaviour whose determinations are located in the various elements of Greek culture:

> vital and self-identical throughout, a complete whole in short, the opinions and characterisation of which are consonant with its aims and actions. It is not the breadth of particular traits which is here of first importance, but the permeating individuality, which synthetically binds all in the central unity, which it in truth is, and displays a given personality in speech and action as issuing from one and the same living source, from which every characteristic, whether it be of idea, deed or manner of behaviour, comes into being.
>
> (Hegel (1975), p. 26)

For Hegel tragic conflict occurs when the ancient Greek protagonist who "irrefragably adhere(s) to the *one* ethical state of pathos which alone corresponds to their own already formed personality" confronts "an ethical Power which opposes them and possesses an equal ethical claim to recognition." (p. 84, emphasis in original) These two elements of a dialectical opposition can only be surmounted by means of "the resolution of specific ethical and substantive facts from their contradiction into their true harmony." (p. 73) To this extent Hegel regards Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which the equal ethical claims of Antigone to bury her brother's dead body and Creon's no less compelling ethical obligations to the city of Thebes, make it "the most excellent and satisfying work of art." (pp. 74 and 133)

Hegel asks questions that tragedy raises, not least involving the issue of why spectators take pleasure in the dilemmas and catastrophes of the dramatic characters themselves. But pleasure itself is shifted onto the protagonist for whom "the pleasure enjoyed has, indeed, the positive significance that the self has become aware of itself as objective self-consciousness," although this is accompanied by a "negative import" that cancels it and reveals its own partiality. Thus "realisation" is experienced as a contradiction "in which the acquired reality of its individual existence finds itself destroyed by the negative element, which stands without reality and without content over against the former, and yet is the force which consumes it." (p. 243)

At the centre of the tragic experience for Hegel, "ethical substance" gets divided in such a way that the protagonist (or agent) "finds himself thereby in the opposition of knowing and not knowing." (p. 294) Such is the case of Oedipus, but it is also the case of Shakespeare's Hamlet and Macbeth. In the latter two instances, and especially in *Macbeth*:

> Ethical rightness, which insists that actuality is nothing *per se* in opposition to absolute law, finds out that its knowledge is one-sided, its law merely a law of its own character, and that it has laid hold of merely one of the powers of the substance.
>
> (p. 295)

This effectively reconceptualises Aristotle's *anagnorisis* as a partial self-consciousness but within a dialectical method in which 'spirit' is self-divided but folds back into itself. This is, to use the formulation of Henri Lefevbre, "the movement of thought … turning back on itself." (Lefevbre (2009) p. 40). For Hegel tragedy is a demonstration of a philosophical process, and art generally is a means of liberating "the real import of appearances from the semblance and deception of this bad and fleeting world, and imparts to phenomenal semblances a higher reality, *born of mind*." (Hegel (1993) p. 11, emphasis added) In fact Hegel has very little to say directly about the Aristotelian categories of 'pity' and 'fear,' or, indeed, about the emotional investment that the spectator makes in the tragic experience. The action of the tragedy may result in death, or, in a play such as Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (405-401 B.C.) in a resolution that postpones death, but in the case of the former there is little awareness of loss; rather Hegel is preoccupied with the

movement of the dialectic towards synthesis, and this reduces the possibility of a focus on the paradoxes that tragedy uncovers. It is to A.C. Bradley's reading of Hegel that we must now turn to develop some of these observations.

BRADLEY ON HEGEL

A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* in 1904 was the culmination of almost a century of placing the emphasis on the 'characters' of Shakespeare's plays, and it was to last until the early 1930s when other ways of reading Shakespeare began to emerge. It is tempting to think that one of the things that attracted Bradley to Hegel was the philosopher's emphasis on the primacy of 'character' or 'personality' in tragic drama. But Bradley is very conscious of the fact that Hegel's comments on tragedy are embedded within a larger framework that he must forcefully "tear from its connections with the author's general view of poetry, and with the rest of his philosophy." (Hegel (1975), p. 367) Some of Bradley's observations are familiar and are equated with the general tenor of discourse on tragedy; for example,

> in all tragedy there is some sort of collision or conflict – conflict of feelings, modes of thought, desires, wills, purposes; conflict of persons with one another, or with circumstances, or with themselves; one, several, or all of these kinds of conflict, as the case may be.
>
> (p. 368)

Bradley acknowledges, as we saw earlier, that while tragedy may involve "unhappiness," not all of the ancient Greek tragedies that have come down to us end in death. He observes firmly that in itself, "[p]ity for mere misfortune, like fear of it, is not tragic pity or fear," (p. 368). But he then proceeds to isolate Hegel's notion of 'spirit' as the locus of deep conflict. He circles around the fundamental rationality of Hegel's system of philosophy and he reinterprets the Hegelian dialectic as embodying tragic conflict that "appeals to the spirit" because "it is itself a conflict of the spirit" (p. 369); this is crucial in Hegel, and Bradley goes on to gloss it as

> A conflict ... between powers that rule the world of man's will and action – his 'ethical substance.' The family and the state, the bond of parent and child, of brother and sister, of husband and wife, of citizen

and ruler, or citizen and citizen, with the obligations and feelings appropriate to these bonds; and again the powers of personal love and honour, or of devotion to a great cause or an ideal interest like religion or science or some kind of social welfare – such are the forces exhibited in tragic action; not indeed alone, not without others less affirmative and perhaps even evil, but still in preponderating mass.

(p. 369)

This is a comprehensive list and it allows Bradley to appeal to the particular Hegelian abstractions of 'depth' and 'universality' that are, he insists, "essential to a great work of art." (p. 369)

Whereas in Hegel 'reason' and rationality are the keys to subjective freedom, very much in line with Enlightenment thinking, Bradley stops short of a full submission to the conclusion of the dialectic, to assert that the self-division of the 'spirit' is fundamentally tragic: "the essentially tragic fact is the self-division and the intestinal war of the ethical substance, not so much the war of good with evil as the war of good with good." (p. 369) While this may have practical and structural consequences, Bradley is content to fixate here on the source of tragic conflict in "the nature of the characters through whom these claims are made." (p. 369) What he downplays is the third, much more positive element in Hegelian dialectic, the 'synthesis' (*Aufhebung*) (see Bhaskar (1993) p. 22). We shall see in a moment what Bradley does with this, since it depends upon a reinterpretation of Hegel which he acknowledges will be his objective from the outset.

Bradley wants to dwell on one aspect of Hegel's account: "the essential point to him is not the suffering, but its cause, namely the action or conflict." (Bradley (1992), p. 368) It is the case that Hegel is concerned with a very particular kind of suffering, that sometimes ends in death, and that sometimes transcends death. For Bradley the emphasis in tragedy is upon "collision," which occurs because of "the nature of the characters through whom" a variety of claims are made. (p. 369) The tragic conflict ends in "the denial of both the exclusive claims. It is not the work of chance or blank fate; it is the act of the ethical substance itself, asserting its absoluteness against the excessive pretensions of its particular powers." (p. 371) The result is that tragedy arrives at a particular impasse where something is gained, but also where something is lost.

Bradley explains the extent to which the Hegelian view of tragedy extends beyond the morality of the acts of protagonists:

> In the first place, it is most important to observe that Hegel is not discussing at all what we should generally call the moral quality of the acts and persons concerned, or, in the ordinary sense, what it was their duty to do. And, in the second place, when he speaks of 'equally justified' powers, what he means, and indeed, sometimes says, is that these powers are *in themselves* equally justified. The family and the state, the bond of father and son, the bond of mother and son, the bond of citizenship, these are each and all, one as much as another, powers rightfully claiming human allegiance. It is tragic that observance of one should involve the violation of another.
>
> (p. 372, emphasis in original)

Bradley describes the positive and negative aspects of the Hegelian dialectic, and after addressing Hegel's critique of 'modern tragedy' he goes on to discuss the latter's "treatment of the aspect of reconciliation in modern tragedy." (p. 379) It is clear that Bradley includes Shakespeare under the umbrella of 'modern' tragedy. According to Bradley Hegel "does not notice that in the conclusion of not a few tragedies pain is mingled not merely with acquiescence, but with something like exultation." (p. 379) He cites *Hamlet, Othello* and (surprisingly) *King Lear*, where he notes that "This exultation appears to be connected with our sense that the hero has never shown himself so great or noble as in the death which seals his failure." (p. 379) This is about as near as Bradley gets to the Hegelian notion of 'synthesis;' he focuses on the impossibility of an essential feature of the dialectic, preferring, in an explicitly unHegelain fashion, to concentrate on loss. This is how he distorts Hegel:

> We have the more general idea – to use again a formula not Hegel's own – that tragedy portrays a self-division and self-waste of spirit, or a division of spirit involving conflict and waste. It implies in this that on *both* sides of the conflict there is a spiritual value. The same idea may be expressed (again, I think, not in Hegel's own words) by saying that the tragic conflict is one not merely of good with evil, but also, and more essentially, of good with good. Only in saying this, we must be

careful to observe that 'good' here means anything that has spiritual value, not moral goodness alone, and that 'evil' has a similarly wide sense.

<div align="right">(p. 381, emphasis in original)</div>

Bradley adopts an empirical stance in focusing, sometimes on the plight of the tragic protagonist – which in Hegel's account of ancient Greek tragedy occasionally leads to death, or to reconciliation – and at others on the emotional stimulus to the spectator who is urged to recognise the fundamental humanity that the tragic conflict brings to the surface and that results in 'waste' or loss. Bradley's reading of Shakespeare's major tragedies exposes to the spectator's gaze a waste of a part of 'spirit' at the very moment of death that robs the protagonist of the opportunity to put the knowledge gained by suffering into practice. Pity here is associated with loss, and fear with threat: we empathise vicariously with the plight of the protagonist while simultaneously being made aware of the consequences of his/her decisions in circumstances where the choices are of equal value. This is rather different from the emphasis that Hegel places on "Pity" and "Fear" in Book 4 of his *Philosophy of the Fine Arts* where the former is associated with "the display of that which is conformable with the reason and truth of Spirit," while the latter is concerned with 'content':

that which mankind has therefore in truth to fear is not the external power and its oppression, but the ethical might which is self-defined in its own free rationality, and partakes further of the eternal and inviolable, the power a man summons against his own being when he turns his back upon it.

<div align="right">(Hegel (1886), p. 653)</div>

NIETZSCHE ON TRAGEDY

The emphasis in Hegel is ultimately on reconciliation and on the synthetic unity of Spirit, and, as in the case of Aristotle, the tragic protagonist is no ordinary person. This will become an issue when we later consider tragedy in relation to what Arthur Miller refers to as "the common man." But Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) moved beyond the debate about tragedy occasioned by Hegel and responded to

complex thinkers such as the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in his *Either/Or* (1843). In his essay "The Tragic in Ancient Drama" Kierkegaard opts for an art that his fictional editor (Victor Eremita) calls "the disjointed and desultory character of unfinished papers," an art designed "to produce skilfully the same effect, the same carelessness and fortuitousness, the same anacoluthic thought process." (Kierkegaard (1987), I.152) This is some distance from Hegel, and to some extent anticipates the fragmentariness of modernism and post-modernism.

In his *The Philosophy of History* (1830–1) Hegel defines what he calls "the Greek spirit" as a particular phase in world history (Hegel (1956), pp. 238–9). Nietzsche, on the other hand, goes back to a particular ancient Greek cultural institution, the city Dionysia, and to the ritual theatrical celebrations in Athens associated with the god Dionysius. He reinterprets the Hegelian notion of "the Greek character as that of *Individuality conditioned by Beauty*" (Nietzsche (1956), p. 239, emphasis in original) as a conflict involving Apollo, as "the marvellous divine image of the *principium individuationis*" (p. 22). Nietzsche borrows this term immediately from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* (1818 and 1844) where it is defined as "the way in which the individual knows things as phenomena" (Schopenhauer (1964), I.455) and hence its identification with time and space. Nietzsche associates the *principium individuationis* with the god Apollo, "whose looks and gestures radiate the full delight, wisdom, and beauty of 'illusion'." (Nietzsche (1956), p. 22) In Schopenhauer the *principium* "is free from all *multiplicity*, although its manifestations in time and space are innumerable." (Schopenhauer (1964), I.146, emphasis in original) In Nietzsche the *principium* represents the fullness of illusion and the order of art (beauty). In contrast the divine figure of Dionysius poses a serious challenge to that order by resurrecting a plural and alien mystery that Apollonian order cannot resist, and it comprises a 'rapture' that is both celebratory and terrifying at the same time.

> Dionysiac stirrings arise either through the influence of those narcotic potions of which all primitive races speak in their hymns, or through the powerful approach of spring, which penetrates with joy the whole frame of nature. So stirred the individual forgets himself completely.
>
> (Nietzsche (1956), p. 22)

Jean-Pierre Vernant reads Euripides' *The Bacchae* in the context of an opposition between 'the city' with its "rationalism of the sophists, with their technical intelligence, their mastery of the art of argument, and their denial of all that is invisible" (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (2006), pp. 402–3), on the one hand, and "a religious experience that has a place for irrational impulses and leads to intimate union with the divine, on the other." (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet(2006), p. 403)

Nietzsche recognises this opposition but *not* in terms of a Hegelian dialectic. Rather, as Vernant points out in the case of *The Bacchae*, "the tragedy does not so much establish an opposition between reason and religion of the soul or intelligence and feeling; rather … it sets up two parallel systems of values." (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet(2006), p. 403) The Dionysiac force is not the negative of a self-divided essence but an alien force that challenges reason and at the same time both celebrates *and* confronts the order that suppresses it. Nietzsche states:

> It is not difficult to imagine the awed surprise with which the Apollonian Greek must have looked on him. And that surprise would be further increased as the latter realised, with a shudder, that all this was not so alien to him after all, that his Apollonian consciousness was but a thin veil hiding from him the whole Dionysiac realm.
>
> Nietzsche (1956), p. 28

Nietzsche ascribes to Apollo a kind of aristocratic individualism which involves "self-control, a knowledge of self-control" and an "artificially restrained and discreet world of illusion" (pp. 34–5), and he then asks us to imagine "how the Apollonian artist with his monotonous harp music must have sounded beside the demoniac chant of the multitude." (Nietzsche (1956), p. 35) A.W. Pickard-Cambridge, we recall, offers a long and complex account of the relationship between the dithyramb and its association with "the festivals Dionysus, in Athens and elsewhere." (1927, p. 8) Nietzsche, however, associates it exclusively with music and Dionysiac festivals, but specifically with "the demoniac chant of the multitude," and with a kind of wild orgiastic music. (Nietzsche (1956), pp. 44–5) Thus, tragedy is situated within the tension between the drive towards individualism and the order and harmony of 'art' that accompanies it, on the one hand, and the 'demoniac' energy that is festive, threatening, ritualistic, orgiastic and terrifying, on the other. What

for Hegel are two elements of a dialectic that the tragic action resolves are for Nietzsche an intermingling of antagonistic forces that are never completely resolved or transcended, or, indeed, successfully contained. However, he rejects completely (and in a way that partially contradicts his earlier remark) the notion of the Chorus as "The idealised spectator, or as representing the populace over against the noble realm of the set." Indeed, he also rejects the idea that tragedy has "any kind of social or political context," claiming that the origins of tragedy were "purely religious." He asserts that "No ancient polity ever embodied constitutional democracy, and one dares to hope that ancient tragedy did not even foreshadow it." (p. 47) As we have already seen, the subsequent scholarly enquiries of Thompson, Hall and others have rejected this view, and we could add Critchley to this list.

This should not cloud the view that at times Nietzsche accurately describes the impact of tragedy. For example, his quibble about the nature of 'character' as "a luminous shape projected onto a dark wall, that is to say *appearance* through and through" (p. 59, emphasis in original) is rapidly followed by a connection between what he calls "a whole series of feminine frailties" that enter with "the Semitic myth of the Fall" and its associated 'guilt.' Moreover, he concludes (and in a language that we now regard as problematic):

> The tragedy at the heart of things, which the thoughtful Aryan is not disposed to quibble away, the contrariety at the centre of the universe, is seen by him as an interpenetration of several worlds, as for instance a divine and a human, each individually in the right, but each, as it encroaches upon the other, having to suffer for its individuality. The individual, in the course of his heroic striving towards universality, de-individuation, comes up against that primordial contradiction and learns both to sin and to suffer.
>
> (p. 64)

Sin is, perhaps, a pejorative term in this context since Nietzsche is concerned to offer an historical account of the emergence of tragedy, and at the same time to distinguish it from a series of explicitly Christian categories. For Nietzsche, tragedy 'dies' with Euripides, because now "the real antagonism was to be between the Dionysiac spirit and the Socratic," between religion and the Dionysiac "spirit of music" (p. 96)

and the logic of science: "the mechanism of concepts, judgments and syllogisms" (p. 94), and "tragedy was to perish in the conflict." (pp. 77 and 88) We shall return to the theme of 'the death of tragedy' later, but it is enough for now simply to note Nietzsche's particular interpretation of it.

Despite what appears to be an earlier reservation about 'character,' Nietzsche's historical account of the decline of tragedy involves an "anti-Dionysiac, and mythic trend in the increased emphasis on character portrayal and psychological subtlety from Sophocles onward":

> Character must no longer be broadened so as to become a permanent type, but on the contrary must be so finely individualised by means of shading and nuances and the strict delineation of every trait that the spectator ceased to be aware of the myth at all and comes to focus on the amazing lifelikeness of the characters and the artist's power of imitation.
>
> (p. 106)

This sounds like a description of the novel, and might actually fit texts such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, or Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but as Bradley discovered, the historical case could be applied to Shakespearean tragedy, and in his comments on *Hamlet* in *The Birth of Tragedy* (p. 51) Nietzsche might not have entirely disagreed. But the nearest Nietzsche gets to some notion of the formal category of tragic resolution is to identify "the metaphysical solace" in "the older tragedy" without which "it is impossible to imagine our taking pleasure in tragedy." (p. 107) For Bradley, with his revision of Hegelian dialectic, the consciousness of loss that death entails remains uppermost and qualifies that pleasure.

The Aristotelian categories of 'pity' and 'fear' do not figure prominently in Nietzsche's heady account of tragedy. The pathway through which the spectator passes to the dangerous domain of "the womb of things" is a *myth* that is interposed between "the universality of its music and the Dionysiac disposition of the spectator" thereby "creating the illusion that music is but a supreme instrument for bringing to life the plastic world of myth." (p. 126) The spectator experiences "supreme delight" but he/she must pass through "annihilation and negation" (presumably the element of 'fear') in order to commune with "the very

womb of things." (p. 133) For Nietzsche the objective is the witnessing of "the fraternal union in tragedy of the two deities, or about the alternation of Apollonian and Dionysiac excitation in the spectator," and not about "the triumph of the moral order, and about the purging of the emotions through tragedy." (p. 133) As the philosopher Gilles Deleuze has suggested, for Nietzsche, "*The Tragic* is the aesthetic form of joy, not a moral solution to pain, fear or pity" (Deleuze (1983), p. 17, emphasis in original):

> It is joy that is tragic. But this means that tragedy is immediately joyful, that it only calls forth the fear and pity of the obtuse spectator, the pathological and moralising listener who counts on it to ensure the proper functioning of his moral sublimations and medical purgings.
>
> (p. 17)

BEYOND NIETZSCHE'S READING OF TRAGEDY

Various elements of Nietzsche's account of tragedy continue to permeate critical and philosophical thinking about the genre. A significant compendium of these elements occurs in Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1985) that seeks ostensibly to investigate the German *Trauerspiel* or 'mourning play.' In a long section, "Trauerspiel and Tragedy," Benjamin offers a critical history that distinguishes between ancient Greek tragedy and its modern (post-Renaissance) German version, and he starts with the Nietzschean distinction between 'myth' and 'history.' He cites the mid-seventeenth-century German commentator Martin Opitz and affirms the primacy of 'myth':

> Opitz does not actually say so – for in his day it was self-evident – but the incidents listed [the commands of kings, killings, despair, infanticide and patricide, coflagrations, incest, war and commotion, lamentation, weeping, sighing, and such like] are not so much the subject-matter as the artistic core of the *Trauerspiel*. Historical life, as it was conceived at that time, is its content, its true object. In this it is different from tragedy. For the object of the latter is not history, but myth, and the tragic stature of the *dramatis personae* does not derive

> from rank – the absolute monarchy – but from the pre-historic epoch
> of their existence – the past age of heroes.
>
> (p. 62)

Benjamin notes the critical distribution of genres to particular social classes, bequeathed to German literary history as the distinctions between pastoral (peasantry), comedy (middle classes) and *Trauerspiel*, along with the novel ('princely estate'). (p. 64) In *The Poetics* Aristotle distinguished between 'tragedy' and 'comedy' where the latter was qualitatively inferior to the former, and even the more sophisticated social distinctions have come down through Nietzsche and others to the point where Benjamin feels the need to reference them.

It is worth pausing over what Benjamin means by the phrase 'absolute monarchy' since it points to the passage from "theocratic claims" made by both by Church and State in Europe during the sixteenth century, to protect their interests and the emergent Protestant rejection of them. The Counter-Reformation sought to hold on to a "theological-juridical mode of thought" in which the ideal constitutional position of the prince was the exceptional figurehead whose executive power guaranteed "the continuity of the community, flourishing in feats of arms and in the sciences, in the arts and in its Church." (p. 65) For Benjamin this Counter-Reformation model precedes the emergence of the baroque period where the focus is on the conditional leadership of the ruler "if war, revolt, or other catastrophes lead to a state of emergency." (p. 65) He goes on to argue that "The baroque knows no eschatology; and for that reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end." (pp. 66 and 81) In other words, the emphasis is on fragmentation rather than on organic unity.

Benjamin teases out the history of tragic drama as it passes through the theological and philosophical debates of the seventeenth century, marking some important differences between the baroque and ancient Greek tragedy. The form that the conflict takes in Greek tragedy is, he argues, "unique" and it leads him to the important question: "For what does the tragic hero die?" Benjamin's response is that "Tragic poetry is based on the idea of sacrifice" although of a unique kind in that it is "at once a first and final sacrifice" (p. 106), but one that has two parts: "A final sacrifice in the sense of the atoning sacrifice to gods who are

upholding an ancient right" and "a first sacrifice in the sense of the representative action, in which new aspects of the life of the nation become manifest." (pp. 106–7) The following is how Benjamin defines what he calls "the tragic death": "The tragic death has a dual significance: it invalidates the ancient rights of the Olympians, and it offers up the hero to the unknown god as the first fruits of a new harvest of humanity." (p. 107)

But he does not stop there, since an alternative focus can be on "tragic suffering" as evidenced in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Oedipus*, where sacrifice undergoes a transformation

> in which the subjection of the hero to death is replaced by a paroxysm which just as surely does justice to the old conception of gods and sacrifice, as it is patently clad in the form of the new conception.
>
> (p. 107)

In dramatic terms, the tragic hero confronts "the demonic world-order" but in philosophical terms "the tragic is to the demonic what the paradox is to ambiguity." (p. 109) There is no clear conclusion in which the moral order of the universe is restored, but following Nietzsche, Benjamin notes the 'silence' of the tragic hero is an inarticulate acknowledgement that he is "better than his gods" as he raises himself up "amid the agitation of that painful world," and that "[t]he paradox of the birth of the genius in moral speechlessness, moral infantility, constitutes the sublime element in tragedy." (p. 110)

Benjamin's concentrated style and his interweaving of quotations makes him difficult to follow and his reliance on Nietzsche is selective. His quarry is the shift from ancient Greek tragedy and its ritual elements to 'modern' tragedies, of which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* becomes an exemplar, with its contempt for the world in the face of an uncertain hereafter. The emergence of Protestantism, with its emphasis on the 'self' as an individual, raises a number of questions concerning the relatively new emphasis on 'character.' Moreover, the Christian focus on the transitory nature of the world, and the notion of 'redemption' from sin removed the terror from death and introduced a new element into the dynamics of tragedy, almost to the point of negating its impact.

In his book *Beyond Tragedy*, the German theologian Reinhold Niebuhr considers the difference between Christianity and tragedy. He

begins by noting Christ's rejection of pity as a human response to his sacrifice and he asserts that "Christianity is a religion which transcends tragedy" (Niebuhr (1965), p. 155) simply because of the possibility of redemption in an afterlife. In the Christian narrative the choice between good and evil, virtue and sin emerges from man's freedom. Consequently, Niebuhr argues, "The cross is not tragic but the resolution of tragedy. Here suffering is carried into the very life of God and overcome. It becomes the basis of salvation." (pp. 155–6) Of course, salvation is dependent upon faith, and pity is reserved for a post-lapsarian human condition that is ultimately rectifiable beyond death. Niebuhr invokes Nietzsche who insisted that "tragedy stands beyond pessimism and optimism" (p. 157) and he cites as a paradigmatic case the novels of Thomas Hardy where the characters are "pitiful" but not tragic. Hardy's characters "remain weak vessels and victims of an inscrutable fate which weaves curious patterns with and into their lives" (p. 156), but from the reader's point of view the pity that they evoke is what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment* which shades into pleasure derived from the suffering of others. The typically Hardy protagonist "may shed tears of momentary pain. But it does not rise sufficiently above its fate to survey its meaning or to subdue the confusion out of which the pain arises." (p. 157)

It is Niebuhr's contention that the nearer we get to 'realism' – as in the plays of Ibsen – the more the emphasis is on "the pathos of human sinfulness" (p. 157) and what is, surely, at issue here is the evocation of one eschatological framework (Christianity and its focus upon the contingent, but temporary, human world) in terms of another (the panoply of superhuman forces and their demands that populate ancient Greek tragedy). In Niebuhr's lexicon the tragic only emerges under certain conditions:

> The genuinely tragic is curiously compounded with the pitiful. This reveals itself whenever the victims of blind fate and chaotic impulse are enmeshed in their suffering by strength as well as weakness, by some noble purpose as well as by blindness.
>
> (p. 159)

His two examples are Gina Ekdal from Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and Shakespeare's King Lear, where the former who is "an unimaginative wife with a spotted past [who] bears the sorrows occasioned by the foibles of

a self-righteous husband with such simple dignity and patience that her sufferings are transmuted from the pitiful to the tragic," and where the latter "is a victim of both his love and his obtuseness so that he loves the daughters who hate him and hates the daughter who loves him." (p. 159) In the former description, the ordinary is elevated to tragic status but in the latter the ruler is reduced in stature. Niebuhr's appeal to what seems a kind of universality strips away the important pre-occupation in *King Lear* with the relationship between the human and the supernatural, while in *The Wild Duck* historical contingency is brought directly into conflict with an idealism that is entirely contingent. In *King Lear* it is possible to hang on to some of the severely truncated elements of classical tragedy, such as the *deus absconditus*, but in the case of Ibsen, as Niebuhr only partly recognises, in the interests of realism, we need to adjust the compass of tragedy.

In Niebuhr's account dynamic tragedy is "both romantic and aristocratic" because "it affirms the whole of life," and is the result of a conflict between "Dionysian impulse and Promethean will." (p. 164) However, he goes on to claim that the protagonist "needs a chorus to extol his virtues and justify his actions" so that pity is necessarily invoked because there is some doubt about where exactly in Greek tragedy "the real centre of life lies, whether in its law or its vitality. Therefore the weak law-abiders must honour the strong law-breakers, lest the latter seem dishonourable." (p. 165) Whereas in Greek tragedy the conflict revolves around opposing but equal demands made upon the protagonist, or is generated by complex Dionysiac forces that are imposed from without, the Christian labelling of apparently transgressive actions as 'sin' transfers and internalises the resultant 'guilt' to mankind:

> Sin emerges out of freedom, and is possible only because man is free; but it is done in freedom, and therefore man and not life bears responsibility for it. It does indeed accompany every creative act; but the evil is not part of the creativity. It is the consequence of man's self-centredness and egotism by which he destroys harmony of existence.
>
> (p. 166)

The discrepancy here is between the formal demands of tragedy that have been abstracted from classical Greek prototypes, and the assumed

transmission of some of its structural elements undiluted from one historical moment to another.

But there is also another response to Niebuhr's account that seeks to reclaim a connection between Christianity and tragedy. In his book *Tragedy,* Terry Eagleton insists that "Marxism and Christianity are indeed tragic doctrines" because "they are conscious of the appalling price that an unjust world must pay for its redemption." (Eagleton (2020), p. 18) This shifts the emphasis from Niebuhr's focus on the 'beyond' of tragedy to the actual horror and the pity that the *process* of redemption has to go through, whether this is crucifixion or violent rebellion. Eagleton observes that "The risen body of Jesus, still bearing the marks of his wounds, cannot annul the fact of his torture and humiliation." (p. 18) In an engagement with Nietzsche later in the book he observes:

> That good may spring from evil is tragic in two different senses. It may be a description of tragedy itself for those who regard it as life-affirming; or it may be tragic in the sense that there is something warped about a world in which such a steep price must be paid for happiness. The New Testament, for which what is awry with the world is known as sin or lack of love, belongs to the latter camp.
>
> (p. 205)

The challenge that Christianity poses to the classical models of tragedy is exacerbated once tragedy as a concept migrates into the field of philosophy proper. We have seen how philosophers address the relationship between tragedy and eschatology, although, with the advent of various types of Christianity tragedy itself fades into the background. It resurfaces again within the framework of some of the problems that philosophy encounters with epistemology and with theories of knowledge and knowledge production. One conspicuous exponent of this kind of link between tragedy and philosophy is the North American philosopher, Stanley Cavell.

Unlike the philosophers of the Enlightenment, for whom Greek tragedy provided models of the ethical problems that tragic protagonists confronted as well as a philosophy of history, Cavell isolates a particular field of enquiry involving scepticism, and he seeks to link the concept with dramatists such as Shakespeare whose plays perform different facets

of 'doubt.' What drives Cavell is not an historical enquiry *per se*, although his references to Descartes and Montaigne suggest some awareness of context:

> I had seen that the extreme precipitousness of the Lear story, the velocity of the banishments, figured the precipitousness of skepticism's banishment of the world, and I had surmised at some length that not only was tragedy obedient to a sceptical structure, but contrariwise, that scepticism already bore its own marks of a tragic structure.
>
> (Cavell (1991), p. 5)

This inversion of historical method ushers in a kind of philosophical presentism that allows Cavell to *read* a dramatist like Shakespeare, or a contemporary popular film, as instances of the kind of epistemological problems that contemporary philosophy faces. As a consequence, he is able to avail himself of the insights derived from contemporary literary theory and Freudian psychoanalysis in order to tease out the dilemmas that Shakespearean characters encounter. The background to this is "the origin of scepticism, as an intimation of, in Kant's concept, human conditionedness." (p. 17) Cavell adds:

> Then what philosophy calls sceptical doubt is a drive to reach the unconditioned. Philosophy may think of the unconditioned, the inexplicable, or the limit of the explicable as the 'given'. Empirical philosophy will think of it as empirically given, say, sensuously given; rational philosophy will think of it as the givenness of reason. Ordinary language philosophy seems, intuitively linked with certain developments of French thought – I am thinking mostly of Lacan and Derrida – in conceiving of the given as language.
>
> (p. 17)

Cavell's exercises in reading Shakespeare are designed to tease out a range of texts – *King Lear, Othello, Coriolanus* and *The Winter's Tale* among others – as complex demonstrations at the level of human psychology of the philosophical problems of knowledge (epistemology) that scepticism poses.

Cavell begins his essay on *Othello* by saying that he wants to think of the play, and of tragedy generally, "as a kind of epistemological

problem, or as the outcome of the problem of knowledge – of the dominance of modern philosophical thought by it." (p. 126) He locates the play in an historical and sociological context, insisting that

> We have to think in this play not merely about marriage but about the marriage of a romantic hero and of a Christian man; one whose imagination has to incorporate the idea of two becoming one in marriage and the idea that it is better to marry than to burn.
>
> (p. 131)

All of the categories that Cavell invokes are traceable to the language of the play, its critical reception over time and St Paul's justification of marriage. But these categories, or types, quickly give way to a sophisticated enquiry into the 'character' of Othello as he encounters an 'other' in the figure of Desdemona. Cavell edges carefully towards a conclusion that highlights the protagonist's individuality and offers us an account of the condition of his 'mind':

> If such a man as Othello is rendered impotent and murderous by aroused, or having aroused, female sexuality – or let us say, if this man is horrified by human sexuality, in himself and in others – then no human being is free of this possibility. What I have wished to bring out is the nature of this possibility, or the possibility of this nature, the way human sexuality is the field in which the fantasy of finitude, of its acceptance and its repetitious overcoming, is worked out; the way human separateness is turned equally toward splendour and toward horror, mixing beauty and ugliness; turned toward before and after; toward flesh and blood.
>
> (p. 137)

In this reading, Othello is, therefore both a unique 'subjectivity' in that he is the distillation of a range of social, philosophical, religious and psychological forces, but also a 'typical' human being whose motives we can investigate and confirm by comparison with what *we* feel and think vicariously about his situation. At the root of what we might call Othello's *actions* is his 'character' and it is the shift away from Aristotle's priority to its alternative (of which Cavell is a particularly sophisticated example) that we must now turn in the next chapter.

5

FROM ACTION TO CHARACTER

With Stanley Cavell we arrive at an important point of convergence of "the birth of scepticism" and the emergence of a new form of subjectivity that Cavell locates in Hegel's claim that "with the birth of Christianity a new subjectivity enters the world." (Cavell (1991), p. 21) This coincides with the shift from 'action' as the primary focus of tragedy to 'character,' and to the emergence of the novel as a dominant aesthetic form. Of course, tragedies as dramas continued to be written, either in imitation of classical originals, or, in the case of English writers, in imitation of Renaissance forms. In the dramas of Shelley, Byron and Joanna Baillie, for example, what is imitated and appropriated are Marlovian or Jacobean models. At the same time translated versions of ancient Greek and Roman tragedies continued to appear, as evidenced in the cases of Ted Hughes' version of Seneca's *Oedipus* (1969), Tom Paulin's translation of *Medea* (2010) or Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973). But more recently, the epic material that ancient Greek tragedy appropriated migrates in thoroughly modernised form into the novels of Colm Tobín (*The House of Names*) or Pat Barker (*The Silence of the Girls* and *The Trojan Women*) and their modernising themes carry over into scholarly rereadings and reappraisals of the ancient Greek originals. However, the inversion of Aristotle's categories in order to

give primacy to 'character' is of a piece with a growing realism, alien to Greek tragedy and also, in part, to Renaissance tragedy, along with new emphases on what motivates character.

In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1985) Water Benjamin invokes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to point to the possibility that "human actions were deprived of all value." (p. 138) He goes on to ask:

> What was the point of human life if, as in Calvinism, not even faith had to be proved, if, on the one hand, faith was naked, absolute, effective, but on the other there was no distinction between actions? There was no answer to this except perhaps in the morality of ordinary people.
>
> (p. 139)

On closer inspection 'life' could be considered "a rubbish heap of partial inauthentic actions" (p. 139) but the resistance to the devaluation of life by 'faith' and the profound terror that death could provoke resulted in "the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it." (p. 139) That 'mask' is what Benjamin defines as "mourning" and it emerges "unmistakably as a *pendant* to the theory of tragedy" and "can only be developed in the description of the world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man." (p. 139. In this argument, Calvinism removes God from explicitly and visibly directing human behaviour (or in the case of ancient Greek tragedy diminishes the interference of deities in human action), relocating the ethical and moral concerns of tragedy to the binding of "every feeling" to "an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology." (p. 139) Consequently we can begin to see why *Hamlet* figures so largely in Benjamin's thinking, since it directs attention to intention:

> Whereas in the realm of emotions it is not unusual for the relation between an intention and its object to alternate between attraction and repulsion, mourning is capable of a special intensification, a progressive deepening of its intention.
>
> (p. 139)

In ancient Greek tragedy the 'intention' of the character is limited and subsumed into the 'action.' Here, however, and deprived of the explicit

interference of some metaphysical force, only a phenomenological con-
nection between the subject and the complex stimulus of an object to
which feeling is attached is possible, and this leads directly to an
enquiry into the material conditions of existence and the motivation
that is required to engage with them.

This presents a problem for dramatic representation that is both perfor-
mative *and* at the same time selective in its mimetic task. But it also signals
a shift in the practice of reading. Maurice Morgann's late-eighteenth-
century *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (1777) lifts
the dramatic character out of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays and rehabi-
litates him as someone who is not "an absolute coward." (Morgann
(1981), p. 165) Morgann continues:

> What there is to the contrary of this it is my business to discover.
> Much, I think, will presently appear; but it lies so dispersed, is so
> *latent*, and so purposely obscured that the reader must have some
> patience while I collect it into one body, and make it the object of a
> steady and regular contemplation.
>
> (pp. 165–6)

While not exactly a symptomatic reading of the kind that we find in
Ernest Jones's explicitly Freudian reading of *Hamlet* in *Hamlet and
Oedipus* (1949), Morgann inaugurated a reading practice that William
Hazlitt sustained in his summary dismissal of the criticisms levelled at
Shakespeare by Samuel Johnson "who did not find the individual traits,
or the *dramatic* distinctions which Shakespear has engrafted on this
general nature, because he felt no interest in them." (Bate (1992), p.
177, emphasis in original) Characterological criticism of this kind
reached its apotheosis in A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904).

In ancient Greek tragedy, as we observed earlier, the motivations for
action were severely limited. The behaviour of the dramatic character
was clearly determined and there was very little in the way of additional
detail beyond the requirements for 'action' and its consequences. With
the advent of the novel and its focus on individuality attention shifted,
to the point that at the end of his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891)
Thomas Hardy's omniscient narrator could observe sardonically that at
Tess's execution "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals
(in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess." (Hardy 2003), p.

397) Tess's misfortunes at the hands of others are ironically ascribed to a classical deity, but one that Hardy admitted was "allegorised as a personality" (p. 461).

Despite many attempts to appropriate the Classics for plots, or to imitate them, the shift of emphasis towards the individual and to 'personality' harmonised with the emphasis in European drama on the movement towards social realism in the plays of Strindberg and Ibsen, and the developing emphasis on psychoanalysis that came to be focused on the figure of Sigmund Freud. In the "Preface to *Miss Julie*" Strindberg claimed that social mores and tensions were "suitable matter for tragedy," and that there were "many possible motivations for Miss Julie's unhappy fate." (Strindberg (1976), p. 93) Strindberg then produces the following catalogue:

> The passionate character of her mother; the upbringing misguidedly inflicted on her by her father; her own character; and the suggestive effect of her fiancé upon her weak and degenerate brain. Also, more immediately, the festive atmosphere of Midsummer Night; her father's absence; her menstruation, her association with animals; the intoxicating effect of the dance; the midsummer twilight; the powerfully aphrodisiac influence of the flowers; and finally, the chance that drove these two people together into a private room – plus, of course, the passion of the sexually inflamed man.
>
> (pp. 93–4)

Just imagine attempting to apply such a list of motivations to a figure such as Clytemnestra, Antigone or Oedipus, much less to Medea, Pentheus or Agauë! For Strindberg, motivation is neither "purely physiological" nor "exclusively psychological" (p. 94), but social in the widest possible sense. It is not quite 'naturalistic' in the Zola-esque sense of the term, nor is it exclusively programmatic in the way that Hardy described the allegorisation of personality. For both Strindberg and Ibsen action was a social activity, and tragedy itself was to be found in the *interaction* between characters. For example, Ibsen's eponymous protagonist in *Hedda Gabler* betrays a catalogue of characteristics that are, on the whole, not too dissimilar from those outlined by Strindberg, and the presiding force in the play is the portrait of her militaristic father, with whose pistol she commits suicide at the end of the play.

The 'possible motivations' of Miss Julie or Hedda Gabler are similar to those that we find in countless nineteenth-century novels, and would certainly apply to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* 1878) in which, as in other nineteenth-century novels, what Jennifer Wallace describes as a "web of interdependence and 'vicissitude' also becomes the very medium within which individual aspiration is imprisoned and crushed." (Wallace (2007), p. 169)

FREUD, OEDIPUS AND *HAMLET*

The focus on female protagonists in Strindberg, Ibsen, Tolstoy and Hardy all emphasise the connection between gender and tragedy, an issue to which we will return in Chapter 6. But perhaps the most influential link between character formation and tragic action is to be found in the psychoanalytical studies of Sigmund Freud, for whom a particular reading of the ancient Greek myth of Oedipus was regarded as key to the male passage from infancy to adulthood. The story, as it appears in Sophocles' *Oedipus* concentrates on the failure of Oedipus's parents to thwart a divine decree that Oedipus would kill his father Laius and marry his mother Jocasta. Indeed, both the parents and the son do everything in their power to avert this particular fate, but by what in human terms seems to be a series of accidents, they fail and the result is a pollution of the state that Oedipus himself tries to solve. In seeking the source of the pollution he discovers his own history and identity, and is forced to enact a terrible justice on himself. In terms of the economy of tragedy this recognition of self, and his taking responsibility for his actions endows Oedipus with a humanity that compensates for his suffering, and it is in the resulting balance that the tragedy lies. It would be fair to say that Oedipus does *not* have a complex, and that it is not sexual desire that drives him to kill his father and marry his mother.

However, Freud reads the myth differently. In his 1924 essay "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" Freud begins by asserting its importance "as the central phenomenon of the sexual period of early childhood." (Freud (1983), p. 315) That it is an important element in the formation of character and sexual identity in Freud's lexicon is unquestionable, but in this essay Freud notes that while at a certain stage "the child's ego turns away from the Oedipus complex" (p. 318) it

remains "repressed" at the same time as the super-ego develops. Freud explains the process as follows:

> But the process we have described is more than a repression. It is equivalent, if it is ideally carried out, to a destruction and an abolition of the complex. We may plausibly assume that we have come upon the borderline – never a very sharply drawn one – between the normal and the pathological. If the ego has in fact not achieved much more than a *repression* of the complex, the latter persists in an unconscious state in the id and will later manifest its pathogenic effect.
>
> (p. 319)

At issue here is the passage from childhood to the adult recognition of authority and the mental constraints that are placed on human behaviour. We shall see what this becomes in Jacques Lacan's restructuring of these Freudian categories later, but for the moment we need to focus on the connection between pathological behaviour, which appears to be subject to scientific analysis, and its consequences in the field of tragedy where the opposition between 'death' and libidinal forces results in pleasure for the spectator.

This is the subject of Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1954), a study that places Shakespeare's play under the microscopic gaze of the practising psychoanalyst. Unlike Maurice Morgann, whose symptomatic reading of the figure of Falstaff was naively empirical, Jones resorts to Freud's Oedipus complex as a key to understanding what he calls "the Hamlet problem." (p. 91) which he describes in the following way:

> As a child Hamlet had experienced the warmest affection for his mother, and this, as is always so, had contained elements of a disguised erotic quality, still more so in infancy. The presence of two traits in the Queen's character accord with this assumption, namely her markedly sensual nature and her passionate fondness for her son ... Nevertheless Hamlet appears to have with more or less success weaned himself from her and to have fallen in love with Ophelia ... There are indications that even here the influence of the old attraction for the mother is still exerting itself.
>
> (pp. 91–2)

This explanation bears a strong resemblance to elements of the narrative of D.H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913) (Lawrence (1989)), but it also gives to Shakespeare's character a 'childhood' and a life beyond the parameters of the dramatic action that can be scientifically studied. In short Shakespeare's characters "are created whose impersonating representatives act and move on the stage, and we are asked to believe that they are living persons; indeed, the dramatist's success is largely measured by this criterion, one in which Shakespeare was superbly pre-eminent." (Jones (1954), p. 19). Here 'action' of the Aristotelian kind is subsumed into a larger predominating pattern of *mimesis* in which the whole life of the tragic protagonist, and the 'problem' of his psychological development, are revealed and explored as causes for his behaviour. For example, Hamlet's 'hesitancy,' we are told, "may have been due to an internal conflict between the impulse to fulfil his task on the one hand and some special cause of repugnance to it, on the other." (p. 56) Hamlet is mentally disturbed by the complexity of his task, but his "psychoneurosis" suggests, *pace* Freud,

> a state of mind where the person is unduly, and often painfully, driven or thwarted by the 'unconscious' part of his mind, that buried part that was once the infant's mind and still lives on side by side with the adult mentality that has developed out of it and should have taken its place.
>
> (p. 77)

The *roman à clef* is the Freudian reading of the Oedipus myth in which the 'action' is a symptom of a fuller life, of which the protagonist is unaware, that both precedes and encapsulates the play. In Jones's account, the Christian 'Providence' whose efficacy Hamlet finally comes to acknowledge (Shakespeare (2006), v.ii.198) pales into insignificance in the face of a diagnosis of the state of the protagonist's 'mind.' No longer is the concern to understand, or, indeed, derive pleasure from, the ancient Greek dynamics of tragic experience; rather, the trajectory from the late nineteenth century onwards is to refigure the conflict of forces that *produces* tragedy, and the Freudian symptomatic reading, for all its amalgamation of scientific discourse and metaphor, is a major step in the direction of this new demonstration of the elements of character motivation.

But nor is this all. In his book *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*, André Green produces a revisionary account of the relationship between Freud and tragedy in his suggestion that what delights the psychoanalyst is that "Aristotle presents him with two of his favourite parameters, childhood and pleasure." (Green (1979), p. 8) Green's concern is with what passes between the spectator in the theatre, the representation on the stage and the absences that the stage representation obscures. He is at pains to point out that the epithet 'Freudian' attached to the noun 'theatre' "does not mean a theatre that presents the discoveries of psycho-analysis, but a theatre that depicts the processes whose formal characteristics Freud has stated." (Green (1985), p. 16) And yet, the pleasure that the spectator derives from watching a tragedy is elusive in Green, compared, say, to A.D. Nuttall's direct confrontation of the issue via a quotation from Norman Holland: "Tragedy pleases because of the formal control it provides": Nuttall's response is to identify a 'light' and a 'dark' element inherent in the Freudian scheme:

> This is to exploit the light side – one might almost say – the familiar element in Freud's scheme. But the dark side of the theory – the side which says there is that in us which actively *desires* death and violence – seems obstinately to offer more to one baffled by the pleasure of tragedy.
>
> (Nuttall (1996), p. 54, emphasis in original)

He reformulates the tension between Eros and the Death drive in Freud as a quasi-Nietzschean conflict between Aristotle's 'Apollonian' thought, on the one hand, and Dionysus, "the god of the irrational." (p. 54) on the other. These forces, whether articulated in Freudian or Nietzschean terms, are fundamentally interconnected, and their resolution (not always, in Greek tragedy at least, in death) allows the spectator to experience the conflict vicariously and to acknowledge a form of resolution that comes close to Aristotelian *catharsis*. In ancient Greek tragedy the conflict is played out in terms of the opposition between the human and the superhuman, but in the theatre where the primacy of 'character' predominates the conflict becomes increasingly located in exclusively human and social motivations. For Green, his placing of "the Oedipus complex in the forefront" of his reading of tragedy opens up "a double

Oedipus complex, both positive and negative (the second being a reverse of the first)." (Green (1985), p. 32)

These two terms each occupy one end of the chain, of which only traces, which have survived repression, remain. The girl is subject to the same structure as the boy. As a result, the human being of either sex carries within, by the very fact of human bisexuality, a double identification, masculine and feminine: the seal of Oedipus. It follows, therefore, that the Oedipus complex is at least quadruple – positive and negative, masculine and feminine – for each individual. (p. 32)

This is, perhaps, a comment on, and a complication of, both the Freudian and, as we shall see, the Lacanian deployment of the Oedipus complex, but it may also be a reason why figures such as Antigone, Electra and Medea have received much more recent attention than hitherto, and we shall deal with that in more detail in Chapter 6. The focus initially on 'character' and its complications, in particular its demonstration of *internal* conflicts, leads ultimately to how it is *represented* and it is to this element that we shall now turn.

TRAGEDY AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN

The advent of Saussurean linguistics forces a reconsideration of the structure of Freudian psychology, and, in particular, a rethinking of the dynamics of the Oedipus complex that was the centre of Ernest Jones's reading of *Hamlet*. Whereas for Freud the unconscious provides the empirical material to which the scientist makes reference and which generates "a consensus about their meaning" he is also aware that "in reality" they are subordinated to what are "strictly speaking … in the nature of conventions." Freud resists the allegation that these conventions are "arbitrary", rather that they are "determined by meaningful connections with the empirical material, connections that, ostensibly, we surmise before we can properly identify and substantiate them." (Freud (2005), p. 13) We saw how in Jones's reading of *Hamlet* the "empirical material" was determined by a series of "meaningful connections," the key to which was the Oedipus complex, which in turn depended upon a particular reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus*. It is as though, in his account of the unconscious, Freud is aware that the clinical observer *constructs* a narrative that he/she then proceeds to validate by empirical observation. Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud, that

predates Green, and in particular his insistence that "the unconscious is structured like a language" inverts Freudian process and places the emphasis on signifying practice. Lacan makes this clear in his essay on "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious" when he says that "the unconscious is neither primordial nor instinctual; what it knows about the elementary is no more than the elements of the signifier." (Lacan (1980), p. 170) There is a larger problem here in that, as Isobel Armstrong has observed in relation to André Green's revisionary reading, "Lacan creates a 'pure' idealist psychic syntax out of the structural principles of the phoneme, morpheme, word and syntagm." (Armstrong (2000), p. 117) Armstrong's concern is with the nature of 'affect' generally and would take the discussion beyond our present concern. It has to be said, however, that for Lacan the signifier operates within the larger sphere of culture, so that entry into language is coterminous with the entry into the social and psychological pressures that form parts of an emerging subjectivity. It reduces to a linguistic order what André Green identifies as an "opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, between the existent and the non-existent, the real and the unreal, yet belongs to neither," at the crossroads of which is positioned "theatrical representation." (Green (1979), p. 76) The history of 'character' from Morgann to Strindberg is now reformulated as a series of pressures that are registered *either* in what Armstrong, discussing Green, would describe as "the return of primal bodily material to language from the unsayable" (Armstrong (2000), p. 118), or in the orderly passage from one stage to another in the operations of language. As Katherine Belsey notes in her book on *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*, in Lacan's account:

> The signifier *replaces* the object it identifies as a separate entity; the linguistic symbol supplants what it names and differentiates, relegates it to a limbo beyond language, where it becomes inaccessible, lost; and in consequence the being of language is the non-being of objects.
> (Belsey (1994), p. 55, emphasis in original)

Lacan's categories of 'the real,' 'the imaginary' and 'the symbolic' record the processes whereby the human subject is introduced into culture, where he/she learns the body of rules and regulations that contribute to the shaping of their subjectivity. This, perhaps, leads us directly to

Lacan's account of Sophocles' *Antigone* in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960* (1999). At the end of his magisterial account of the historical transmission of the myth of Antigone in Western thought, George Steiner defines what he calls "the integral authority of the classic" which "is such that it can absorb without loss of identity the millennial incursions upon it, the accretions to it, of commentary, of translations, of enacted variations," and he notes that "Sophocles's *Antigone* will not suffer from Lacan." (Steiner (1986), pp. 296–7) While there is much to dispute in Steiner's definition of the category of 'the classic,' and indeed in his claim that the originary meaning survives subsequent interpretations, he misses the significance of the Saussurean linguistic turn that Lacan deploys to reread both Freud and Sophocles.

Lacan is not the first to have lighted on *Antigone* as an exemplary tragedy. Hegel sought to focus on the unique relationship between brother and sister in *Antigone* arguing that in contrast to the figure of the wife whose "ethical life is not pure" because she is "without the moment of knowing herself as *this* particular self in the other partner [her husband]," a brother "is for the sister a passive, similar being in general; the recognition of herself in him is pure and unmixed with any natural desire." Hegel concludes that "[t]he loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty toward him is the highest." (Hegel (1977), p. 275, emphasis in original) In an extremely complicated, but also misogynistic, passage Hegel distinguishes between 'man' as "universal self-conscious Spirit" and the "*unconscious Spirit*" of 'woman' with whom he unites; this unity is described as follows:

> One from actuality down to unreality, the downward movement of human law, organised into independent members, to the danger and trial of death; and the other, the upward movement of the law of the nether world to the actuality of the light of day and to conscious existence. Of these movements, the former falls to man, the latter to woman.
>
> (p. 278, emphasis in original)

We can, perhaps, see in this a version of the opposition between Antigone and Creon in Sophocles' play, and why Lacan, following Hegel, should focus on the ethical element of the conflict.

For Lacan the tragic conflict in *Antigone* is not "a question of a right opposed to a right," but of a wrong opposed

to what? To something else that is represented by Antigone. Let me tell you that it isn't simply the defense of the sacred rights of the dead and the family, nor is it all that we have been told about Antigone's saintliness. Antigone is borne along by a passion, and I will try to tell you which one it is.

(Lacan (1992), p. 254)

Tantalisingly, Lacan postpones his answer, but when he does return to the play in the following seminar he isolates the term "Atè" that "designates the limit that human life can only briefly cross" (pp. 262–3) but that he later associates with the family. (p. 283) This represents the violation that is the result of what Antigone finds unbearable in that "[s]he lives with the memory of the intolerable drama of the one whose descendance has just been destroyed in the figure of her two brothers. She lives in the house of Creon; she is subject to his law." (p. 263) According to Lacan, Antigone "pushes to the limit the realisation of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such," of which she is the incarnation. (p. 282) In what is effectively an overview of *The Theban Plays* he suggests that her desire should be "the desire of the Other and be linked to the desire of the mother" which he takes to be "the origin of everything." (pp. 282–3) He continues, "[T] the desire of the mother is the founding desire of the whole structure … but it is also a criminal desire," and in choosing Polynices, Antigone "chooses to be purely and simply the guardian of the being of the criminal as such." (p. 283) In all of this Lacan identifies Antigone's subversive feminine power, but he also wants to insist on her 'beauty' and "splendour," upon her aesthetic appeal. If we take George Steiner's description of tragedy as:

The 'polemic' between God and man, the process of transcendental collision [that] entails the death or, more rigorously expressed, the self-destruction of the protagonist … Yet only in such death can there be a restoration of equilibrium. The 'organic' now takes on universal validity for the individual and the 'aorgic' ['an unbounded, formless, subconscious, and potentially all-consuming life force'] which rages in the singular spirit is made subject to rational understanding and to integration in nature and society.

(Steiner (1986), pp. 76–7)

then we can begin to see why he should think that Lacan has done damage to Sophocles' play in that he questions the rational/emotional conflict that Steiner appears to associate with masculine rationality. On the other hand, to read the ending of *Antigone* as a restoration of (masculine) rational order is to adopt the limited moralistic position of the Chorus who counsel that "wisdom" demands holding "The Gods in awe" as "the law" (Sophocles (1967), p. 162). Steiner's implicitly anti-feminist stance can be traced back to Hegel's account of the subversive power of "ethical consciousness" that engages in a conflict with "divine law" and that sees in it "only the violence of human caprice":

> Since it sees right only on one side and wrong on the other, that consciousness which belongs to divine law sees in the other side only the violence of human caprice, while that which holds to human law sees in the other only the self will and disobedience of the individual who insists on being his own authority. For the commands of government have a universal public meaning open to the light of day; the will of the other law, however, is locked up in the darkness of the nether regions, and its outer existence manifests as the will of an isolated individual which, as contradicting the first, is a wanton outrage.
>
> (Hegel (1977), p. 280)

In short, "order" is masculine and rational, while "human caprice" is nothing more than the implicitly feminine "will of an isolated individual" which is 'a wanton outrage.'

It is André Green who departs from this formulation, in his account of Euripides' *The Bacchae* which emphasises "not so much a struggle between passion and language – between Dionysus and Apollo – as a struggle between one logos and another, with no certainty that either has finally triumphed." Indeed, he sees tragedy as "the representation of this alternate process of inscription and effacement, in which each term strives to absorb the other."(Green (1979), p. 168) He is at pains to show that in this play ritual is not a natural phenomenon that can be reduced to an embodiment of female passion, but a female assault (provoked both by Pentheus's curiosity (desire) *and* by the masculine rational rejection of Dionysiac desire) on the symbolic order itself:

> On the contrary, it is the culturation of the natural. If the cultural excludes it, the punishment of the god will fall: the Dionysiac rite becomes frenzy sent by the god, *in which the symbolic collapses* again under the pressure of the repressed, and the mother, instead of devouring the living flesh of fawns, tears at her children's entrails.

<div align="right">(p. 171, emphasis added)</div>

What is challenged in Euripides' play is the role of the feminine as 'object,' and the place that desire occupies in a culture that resists its energies. Green concludes: "Acceptance of the Dionysiac cult is, in the end, the best way of rendering desire what is its due, of forcing the excess that it expresses into a system of exchange." (p. 176)

While the elements of tragic narrative shift from time to time they move within the parameter of a recognisable series of alternatives, and they depend upon grand narratives that emphasise particular structures of power and posit a relation and a balance between the human and the divine. To this extent tragedy has provided a metalanguage, which is one way of describing the survival through repetition, translation, appropriation or adaptation of ancient Greek models. However, the advent of post-modernism, on the back of the linguistic turn, poses a real challenge to this version of tragedy. What Jean-François Lyotard describes as "the post-modern condition" in general "necessitates a reformulation of the question of the legitimation of knowledge" (Lyotard (1984), p. 43), and he suggests that

> The principle of a universal metalanguage is replaced by the principle of a plurality of formal and axiomatic systems capable of arguing the truth of denotative statements; these systems are described by a metalanguage that is universal but not consistent.

<div align="right">(p. 43)</div>

That "principle of a plurality" stands in opposition to monolithic 'truth' indicating a challenge to its establishment of 'knowledge' validated by "a subject that develops by actualising its learning possibilities," and replacing it with "a practical subject – humanity." This "practical subject" bears an uncanny resemblance, *mutatis mutandis*, to the protagonists of ancient Greek tragedy:

> The principle of the movement animating the people is not the self-legitimation of knowledge, but the self-grounding of freedom, or, if preferred, its self-management. The subject is concrete, or supposedly so, and its epic is the story of its emancipation from everything that prevents it from governing itself. It is assumed that the laws it makes for itself are just, not because they conform to some outside nature, but because the legislators are, constitutionally, the very citizens who are subject to the laws. As a result, the legislator's will – the desire that the laws be just – will always coincide with the will of the citizen, who desires the law and will therefore obey it.
>
> (p. 35)

Lyotard contends that this departs significantly from "a first proof or transcendental authority" that traditionally underpins the act of legitimation, rather that

> the conditions of truth, in other words, the rules of the game of science, are immanent in that game … and that there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by experts.
>
> (p. 29)

We have seen over the previous four chapters how consensus is achieved in relation to tragedy, and how it is challenged in the privileging of 'character' over 'action' (especially in the case of psychoanalysis). In the remaining chapters we will explore further other challenges to that consensus.

6

TRAGEDY
GENDER, POLITICS AND AESTHETICS

The emphasis on the figure of Oedipus has, with one or two notable exceptions, meant that tragedy is entangled in a masculine discourse. Plays such as *Antigone, Electra, Iphigenia in Aulis,* Euripides' *Medea* and *The Bachae* all provide counter-examples to some extent, although the energy that might attract the epithet 'feminist' has no independent identity. In the early modern period, plays such as John Webster's *The White Devil* (1609) or *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612) sketch out female protagonists who struggle in the face of an environment that is viciously masculine, and in some ways Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888) or Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1981) expose the tragic consequences of the masculine shaping of female identity. It is Webster who is most explicit, since his female protagonist, Vittoria Corrombona, can anticipate her judge Monticelso's allegation that she is a "whore" and a "murd'ress", who "Take[s] from all dead beasts, and from all minerals / Their deadly poison," (Webster (1966), 3.2.103–4) with the audacious dismissal that "This character scapes me" (3.2.101), and can counter it with a devastating deconstructive observation:

> Terrify babes, my lord, with painted devils,
> I am past such needless palsy, – for your names

> Of whore and murd'ress they proceed from you,
> As if a man should spit against the wind,
> The filth returns in's face.

$$(3.2.147–51)$$

Whereas Shakespeare allows female protagonists to share the limelight with their male counterparts as in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*, only rarely does the sentiment expressed by Webster's problematic protagonists emerge, and even then, as in the case of Aemilia, Desdemona's waiting-woman in *Othello*, it is in the voice of a social inferior:

> Let husbands know
> Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,
> And have their palates both for sweet and sour
> As husbands have. What is it that they do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
> I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
> It is so too. And have not we affections?
> Desires for sport? And frailty, as men have?
> Then let them use us well: else let them know,
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.
>   (Shakespeare (2016), 4.3.92–102)

Both Vittoria and Aemilia comment on the masculine *shaping* of female identity, giving them agency but only in exceptional circumstances in relation to their actions. Also, they rarely manage to disentangle themselves from masculine stereotypes of the feminine. Moreover, the choice of the myth of Oedipus as a constitutive feature of the psychology of 'character' reinforces what Isobel Armstrong has called "a phallocentric model of Oedipal loss" that even in the case of "the primal separation from the mother's body is predicated on phallic power." (Armstrong (2000), p. 207) It is this that determines female characterisation, and that draws our attention to the ways in which it appears in Greek tragedy where female tragic agency is frequently ambiguous, but where masculine authority is occasionally undermined.

However, as Nicole Loraux has observed, "We should accept that tragedy constantly disturbs the norm in the interest of the deviant, but

at the same time we must be aware that under the deviant the norm is often silently present." (Loraux (1998) p. 248) For example, Hedda Gabler shoots herself with her father's pistol, thereby asserting a masculinity in the face of a femininity that she constantly repudiates; also, and in contrast, Hardy's Tess is hanged, and the manner of her death reflects that reserved in ancient Greek tragedy for women (pp. 237–40) which makes her death pathetic rather than tragic, the victim of the actions of other human agents, despite Hardy's formal (perhaps heavily ironical) displacement of the cause of her downfall onto superhuman powers.

In addition to exploring the roles of women in ancient drama, and augmenting that knowledge with sociological, historical and/or philosophical information that might help to explain their behaviour, the emergence of feminism placed a new emphasis on the issues of representation, and also on modes of reading. The concern here was not with the *fidelity* of the representation itself, but with the various ways in which it was entangled historically and ideologically both in the moment of its inscription *and* in the subsequent moments of its reception. In this respect feminism (which was not a unified movement by any means) took its place alongside other forms of rereading, all of which problematised notions of subjectivity. We have seen how psychoanalysis sought to analyse the tragic protagonist, finding behaviour to be a symptom of concealed psychic activity. But tragedy also depended on other energies that demanded attention.

TRAGEDY AND VIOLENCE

Pre-eminent among those energies was the problematic concept of violence. Terry Eagleton has observed that tragedy "deals in blasted hopes and broken lives" (Eagleton (2003), p. 25) and that "it needs meaning and value if only to violate them. It disrupts the symmetry of our moral universe with its excess and inequity, but its power depends on a faith in that even-handedness." (p. 26) The return to "even-handedness" or "aesthetics of tragedy" comprises the cathartic force of which is felt vicariously by an audience. Whether the disruption of a moral universe is attributed to demonic energy, as in the case of Nietzsche's account of the opposition between Dionysus and Apollo, or to the opposition between a rational masculinity and an anarchic femininity, both appear

to be associated with a process of law. Tragedy is heavily implicated in the processes of 'law' and 'justice;' it violently violates some aspect of law, or pits one aspect against another, and to the extent that it does so, it is also involved in the process of what Walter Benjamin called "power making," *and* "justice." Indeed, he describes the connection in the following manner: "Lawmaking is power making, and to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical law making." (Benjamin (1978), p. 295)

Eagleton takes this a stage further in addressing the pleasurable *effect* that the violence of Law can produce in its attempts to encourage acknowledgement of its authority and to guarantee complicity as human subjects:

> The Law is not the least averse to our delight, so long as it is the pleasure we pluck from allowing its death-dealing force to shatter us erotically to pieces. It is tender for our fulfilment, ordering us to reap morbid gratification from destroying ourselves; and the more guilt this self-odium breeds in us, the more we clamour for the Law to chastise us and so deepen our pleasure. Like all effective authorities, the Law good-heartedly encourages the participation of its subjects. In admirably paternalist spirit, it wishes us to take a hand in the business of torturing ourselves, work all by ourselves, make it appear that our self-undoing is our own doing, so that it may accomplish its ends all the more successfully.
>
> (Eagleton (2003), p. 269)

Applied to tragedy, this offers a hegemonic account of the purpose of pleasure, and it re-establishes a moral framework which implies a politics that resides at the heart of the Aristotelian notion of catharsis. But while we might say that the discourse of ancient Greek tragedy ritually acknowledged the power of the gods, the critical discourse of, for example, feminism (among other radical discourses) perceives in the interstices of the form a critique of that power. In his attempt to distinguish between the violence of real life and that of 'art' Slavoj Žižek counters Theodor Adorno's claim that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz with the observation that "[r]ealistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds," and

he adds that "poetry is always by definition, 'about' something that cannot be addressed." (Žižek (2009), p. 4) This offers a practical reason, in passing, for the absence of onstage violence in ancient Greek tragedy, although it does not fully account for the morbid fascination with violence on our cinema and TV screens.

But let us return to the link between tragedy and ritual that we broached in earlier chapters, since for some commentators, whose emphasis is on the ethnological and anthropological accounts of the tragic, it also involves myth. We saw how Walter Benjamin regarded mythical violence as "law making," but René Girard takes the issue a little further in his challenging suggestion that, firstly, "[m]yths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the re-interpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them;" and secondly, "tragedy is by its very nature a partial deciphering of mythological motifs." (Girard (1977), p. 64) In his chapter on Dionysus in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard reprises Emile Durkheim's observation that

> the festival re-vitalises the cultural order by re-enacting its conception, reproducing an experience that is viewed as the source of health and abundance; re-enacting, in fact, the moment when the fear of falling into interminable violence is most intense and the community is therefore more closely drawn together.
>
> (p. 120)

Girard's archaeology of violence begins from the moment of "spontaneous and senseless violence" that is superseded by a "sacrificial explanation" that is "rooted in an act of terminal violence, violence that can only be labelled sacrificial retrospectively, because it brought the hostilities to an end." (p. 124) His ethnographical logic informs Girard's reading of Euripides's *The Bacchae* and its staging of sacrificial crisis. He argues that at the end of the play "no real contest ever existed between the omnipotent Dionysus and the culpably weak Pentheus" and that the dramatist is caught between "the symmetry of the tragic action and the dissymmetry of the mythological content" that prevented him from "an act of even greater audacity" in positing Pentheus as offering a genuine human alternative to the power of the god. (p. 129) In a challenge to the Freudian reading Girard insists that

> [w]e cannot hope to understand the rite merely by attributing it to psychic motivations, either conscious or unconscious. And in spite of all appearances, gratuitous sadism plays no part in the procedure. The rite is directed toward order and tranquillity, not violence. It strives to achieve violence solely in order to eliminate it.
>
> (p. 132)

Thus, at the root of Euripides' play lies a myth and a ritual deriving from "a generative act of unanimity." (p. 132) This explains the significance of the *sparagmos* (p. 131) as the violent act of dismemberment of a living body, whether human or animal, but also its medicinal purpose as a means of siphoning off potentially harmful impurities, and of re-establishing a unanimity among the participants. The figure that strides these two processes, and that displaces "the very real (though often hidden) hostilities that *all the members of the community feel for one another*" is the *pharmakos*. (pp. 95–7 and 99, emphasis in original) Here Girard follows Derrida who, in *Dissemination* (1981) described the *pharmakos* as "harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil – and for that, feared and treated with caution. Alarming and calming. Sacred and accursed. The conjunction, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, ceaselessly undoes itself in the passage to decision or crisis." (Girard (1998), p. 348)

Girard's complicated reading of ancient Greek tragedy identifies a structure some of the elements of which are clearly trans-historical, and his ethnographical explanation of the role of violence contains an element of flexibility that permits different applications that extend into the affective power of tragedy. But what Euripides' *The Bacchae* raises and what Girard identifies is what he calls [t]he pre[ponderance of women in the Dionysiac cult" thereby raising the question of how their presence might be read. Indeed, he sees this as effecting

> a secondary mythological displacement, an effort to exonerate from the accusation of violence, not mankind as a whole, but adult males, who have the greatest need to forget their role in the crisis because, in fact, they must have been largely responsible for it.
>
> (Girard (1977), p.139)

A feminist reading would extend this further to account for the construction of the female subject in the tragedy, and to show how 'woman'

is produced in this context. We shall return to the issue of the production of the tragic subject in Chapter 7 where, in a play such as Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards,* the protagonist is shown to emerge under a particular set of social and economic pressures as the agent of a particular social class, and that takes us away from the domain of historical anthropology bringing us closer to the present.

TRAGEDY AND AESTHETICS

We have seen how violence is dealt with historically, and how it is represented as part of the content of tragedy, and we have also seen how, in the case of a radical challenge to accepted critical procedures, feminism poses some serious questions with regard to the nature of representation itself. But tragedy also carries an affective charge that cannot easily be reduced to its social or ethnological content. Indeed, Terry Eagleton has described it as "simply the name given to that hybrid form of cognition which can clarify the raw stuff of perception and historical practice, disclosing the inner structure of the concrete." (Eagleton (1990), p. 16) Hegel put the matter a little more airily in his observation that:

> The artistic semblance has the advantage that in itself it points beyond itself, and refers us away from itself to something spiritual which it is meant to bring before the mind's eye. Whereas immediate appearance does not give itself out to be deceptive, but rather to be real and true, though all the time its truth is contaminated and infected by the immediate sensuous element.
>
> (Hegel (1993), p. 11)

What does all this mean for tragedy? Once we have teased out its historical and sociological origins in myth and ritual and the various ways in which the "the raw stuff of perception and historical practice" disclose an actual history, we are left with something which the empirical detail does not quite fully account for. Lacan, in his analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone* thought that something remained which the political opposition between 'family' and 'state' could not fully explain. He called it "the splendour of *Antigone*," or, to adapt the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer as part of his definition of the category of the aesthetic, "there

is something in our experience of the beautiful that arrests us and compels us to dwell upon the individual appearance itself." (Gadamer (1986), p. 16)

Here what Jacques Rancière distinguishes as "the relationship of the historical agent to the speaking subject" (his definition of the 'historical reality') set against "the logic of fiction" can be traced back to Aristotle, and to the difference between narrative and history. (Rancière (2004), pp. 37–8) The problem with tragedy historically conceived is that it combines the two categories of the rational and the sensuous, an issue which Rancière claims aesthetics itself has exacerbated by "blurring the boundaries between the logic of facts and the logic of fictions" (p. 36) His objective is to elucidate the problem raised by the claim that historical narrative itself is impregnated with certain rhetorical elements of the discourse of 'fiction' that are themselves inherent in the materials of signification (language) which aims at realism (history). Both discourses aim at 'truth,' but no longer is the Aristotelian category of "what could happen" autonomous. He concludes, "The poetic 'story' or 'history' henceforth links the realism that shows us the poetic traces inscribed directly in reality with the artificialism that assembles complex machines of understanding. (p. 38) While this 'blurring' serves to identify the formal features of the poetic discourse of tragedy, it also addresses its content and the political determinations that comprise a representation of its historical content. This is why we can read ancient Greek tragedy 'otherwise,' exposing its political and gender purchases to the culture that produced it. It also gives us the freedom to posit an *essence* of tragedy that can be recovered and refashioned from one epoch to the next, opening up r-readings of its historical reality (the work of cultural anthropology and ethnography) *and* of its aesthetic structure. Perhaps we should qualify the term *essence* here since trans-historical appropriations involve adjustments to the formal structure of tragedy that result in revisions, adjustments of emphasis, the elimination or transformation of original material (for example, the chorus) and adjustments under the pressure of increasing realism of presentation.

One other element that we need to address briefly in this chapter is the tension between persistent imitations of tragic form, which, *mutatis mutandis*, we can identify at various historical conjunctures and the occasional absence, dilution or even disappearance of the genre of tragedy from time to time. What we might call the presence of tragedy

depends in some measure on a particular combination of circumstances. These include doubt about the independence and efficacy of human agency and about what it is to be 'human,' forms of ritual practice and the sharpness of an awareness of death. All of these concerns are combined in tragedy to produce pleasure, but also to posit universal 'truth.' It is this that we need to be careful of, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested. Indeed, even while he is prepared to acknowledge that "Kant's aesthetics is true" he offers this important qualification:

> The experience of the beautiful of which Kant offers us a rigorous description has definite economic and social conditions of possibility that are ignored by Kant, and that the anthropological possibility of which Kant sketches an analysis could become *truly universal* only if those economic and social conditions were universally distributed.
>
> (Bourdieu (1998), p. 135, emphasis in original)

However, an important mechanism in the structure of tragedy is a conflict between the business of existence and the compensations, if any, offered through suffering and death. Tragedy offers the possibility of limited emancipation by advancing through what Theodor Adorno, in a much larger context, calls "a determinate negation" (Adorno (2004) p. 227), new possibilities that force a reassessment of human purpose, and establish rules that point towards an escape from impasse. Stripped from its context, the mechanisms of tragedy appear formalistic, but the historical determinants are crucial in that they contain the various forces that provide models of what confronts the tragic protagonist. These confrontations are agonistic, often deadly, but also implicitly ethical and moral posing questions of justice, punishment and consolation. In this the protagonist is representative, but in Aristotle's terms that means "better than the average." Historically that has meant that tragedy is the preserve of the aristocracy, but in the twentieth century this view has come under serious challenge, and this is the subject of Chapter 7.

7

RETHINKING THE TRADITION

In his 1910 essay on "The Metaphysics of Tragedy" Georg Lukács stated that:

> In vain has our democratic age claimed an equal right for all to be tragic; all attempts to open this kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit has proved fruitless. And those democrats who are consistent about their demand for equal rights for all men have always disputed tragedy's right to existence.
>
> (Lukács (1974), p. 173)

For Lukács dramatic tragedy represents "the high points of existence, its ultimate goals and ultimate limits," (p. 159) making it majestic, if not aristocratic, in its nature and its appeal. Democracy, which presupposes egalitarianism, and which embodies political assumptions about the perpetual and desirable nature of historical change and who may, by virtue of their membership of the human race, contribute to it, reduces, according to Lukács, the metaphysical dimension of 'mystical' experience which he deems an essential ingredient of tragedy.

Lukács was by no means the first to have made this claim and he was not the last. More recently, this cause has been championed by George

Steiner, whose book, *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) offers an extended treatment of this position. Behind Steiner's critique of the rationalism associated with modernity lies a conservative impatience with, if not the regret of, the passing of the 'organic society': "After the seventeenth century the audience ceased to be an organic community to which these ideas and their attendant habits of figurative language would be natural and immediately familiar." (p. 197) In this unfashionably elitist cause, Steiner pits the prosaic form of the novel against 'verse' which he describes as "the prime divider between the world of high tragedy and that of ordinary existence." (p. 241) Indeed, according to Steiner, "verse and tragedy belong together in the domain of aristocratic life. Comedy is the art of the lesser orders of men." (p. 247) In the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov the dilemmas encountered are irreducibly 'secular' and they can be resolved by "rational innovation" (p. 291) and the political optimism that accompanies it. We shall have more to say about this account when we come to deal with the challenge posed by radical commentators such as Raymond Williams.

What is missing for Steiner is an "organic world view" and the whole "context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference" that supports it (p. 292), in short, the mythology and the narratives that underpinned ancient Greek and early modern tragedy. Up to a point this is a form of critical sentimentalism, but it sits uneasily with another of Steiner's claims, expressed here as a retreat into formalism, that "Every art form seeks to define its own idiom either by enhancement of the available modes or by reaction against them." (p. 308) However, in the face of the imitations and translations of the ancient Greek models of tragedy, Steiner seems unwilling to accept the possibility that the meaning of the term 'tragedy' may not, after all, be singular. His claim that "Christianity is an anti-tragic vision of the world" (p. 331) would rule out of consideration a play such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which ghosts languish in purgatory and where the tragic hero (admittedly a prince) like his father, dies unshriven. If there is "a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" that underpins every human contingency in the play, then divine punishment or indeed forgiveness is less than fully comprehensible from a human point of view. This is why Horatio's account of the drama does not progress beyond the field of the purely contingent, and it is why, in the final analysis, providence is a little less than even-handed. Horatio's account is *what* happens in *Hamlet* but it is not *all* that happens, and resolution is, in the final analysis, provisional.

Although modern life is distanced from that of ancient Greece, that distance permits a certain kind of cognition that goes under the general name of 'tradition.' This comprises a distillation of what we might call the 'essence' of tragedy that, as Lukács observed, transcends its own historical moment to provide a 'universal' account of the relationship between the human and the divine, between suffering and joy and between life and death. This gradual process of aestheticisation, exacerbated by early nineteenth-century philosophical accounts of the aesthetic, asserts, as Jacques Rancière has observed, "the absolute singularity of art, and at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity." (Rancière (2004), p. 23) Thus, as we saw earlier, attempts could be made to embed ancient Greek tragedy historically in various processes of myth creation that involved its reduction to an ahistorical essence that had universal validity and that had the effect of insulating it from the details of ordinary life and its secular patterns of order and causality.

Raymond Williams flew directly in the face of Steiner's charting of the death of tragedy by posing a simple question: "Is it really the case that what is called the tradition carries so clear and single a meaning?" (Williams (1966), p. 14) For him tradition was not a neutral monolithic representation of the past but an 'interpretation' of it, "a selection and valuation of ancestors, rather than a neutral record." (p. 16) This immediately freed a concept such as tragedy from the singularity of meaning that Steiner had insisted on, and that he had extended, some 20 years after the appearance of Williams' own *Modern Tragedy*, to account for what he called "the *Antigone* predominance" (Steiner (1986), p. 8). While it would be fair to say that Steiner is not unaware of the dynamics of interpretation, he insists on the persistence through history of a play such as Sophocles' *Antigone* and maintains it was generally thought by "European poets, philosophers, scholars that [it] was not only the finest of Greek tragedies, but a work of art nearer to perfection than any other produced by the human spirit." (Steiner (1986), p. 1)

What for Steiner was a non-transferable essence, for Williams is something other than "an isolable aesthetic or technical achievement: it is deeply rooted in a precise structure of feeling" (Williams (1966), p. 18), and that structure is susceptible to change. The phrase 'structure of feeling,' however, is one to which Williams continually returns, and is a way of identifying the historical and variable roots of the emotional life

of a culture that is transmuted into art. It is this 'structure of feeling' that exerts its own pressures on what has come down from the past to the present, and it is what produces adjustments and changes in interpretation.

The genesis of Williams' phrase can be traced back to 1961, the year of publication of *The Long Revolution* (the same year as the publication of Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy*) and to his delineation there of "three levels of culture":

> There is the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place. There is the recorded culture of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period. There is also, as the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition.
>
> (Williams (1961), p. 66)

For Williams "the cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors" (p. 69), a process of selection and interpretation that he was to rearticulate in *Modern Tragedy* (Williams (1966)). Williams and Steiner would agree that ancient Greek tragedy emerged from a particular set of cultural circumstances, but while Steiner mourns the passing of a particular cultural context as the qualitatively reductive product of an embourgeoisification of social and artistic experience with its emphasis on modernity and forms of artistic realism, Williams is more hopeful and so he pays much greater attention to emergent pressures and to their contribution to new contemporary structures of feeling. The selection practised by Steiner would make of tragedy a singular experience, constantly repeated in the face of cultures for which there are no longer adequate intellectual, mythological and emotional support structures, whereas for Williams the demise of one ethos provides the opportunity for others to emerge.

It is worth pointing out here that Williams came to revise his view of structures of feeling in the face of criticism that would force him to recognise the challenge to its organic implications from an awareness of the differences between social classes. Under some close questioning in *Politics and Letters* he admitted that "the evidence for the concept is only going to be articulate and available in fully expressed work" but that "it can be objected that the notion illegitimately infers from this range of

evidence the existence of a structure which is much wider and is unexpressed." (Williams (1981), p. 158) Indeed, he confesses that his awareness of "a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones, for which the best evidence was often the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing" derived in purely empirical terms from the "actual experience of literary analysis rather than from any theoretical satisfaction with the concept itself." (p. 159) Whereas for Lukács the tragic man's struggle involved the challenge posed by "autonomous selfhood" to "the total dissolving of the self in a higher being" (p. 160), for Williams it became "quite clearly a matter of behaviour rather than either a metaphysical condition or a metaphysical fault." (Lukacs (1961), p. 26) Indeed, he goes on to challenge the "universalist character of most tragic theory" and to challenge the idea of "a permanent and unchanging human nature." (p. 46) Moreover, he seeks to demystify what he calls "a total meaning of tragedy" re-articulating it as "in fact a particular meaning, to be understood and valued historically," (p. 61) and locating its tensions as a conflict "between the old and the new." (p. 54)

This is an important context within which to read *Modern Tragedy*, since Williams begins from the admission that even in its modern secularised form it involves "an emptying out of content behind a retention of terms." (Williams (1966), p. 28) In his account of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* Williams shows what happens when a play "based on an historical martyrdom … in all essentials is taken out of its particular context and made part of an 'eternal design'." (p. 160) In the play, which includes choruses, and is written in blank verse, the protagonist becomes a tragic scapegoat who is part of a ritual sacrifice; it is not, Williams argues, "to the heroic will of the martyr that our response is directed, but to his subjection of himself to his part in the pattern, and to the fertilising effects of his blood." (p. 161) It is Williams' contention that Eliot divides humanity "into the many unconscious and the few conscious, in terms similar to the division between unauthentic and authentic man," but that

> Tragedy rests not in the individual destiny of the man who must live this sacrifice, but in the general condition, of a people reducing or destroying itself because it is not conscious of its true condition. The tragedy is not in the death, but in the life.

> (p. 162)

To focus on the murder of Becket as protagonist would be to emphasise the pathos of the event, whereas for Williams the *effect* of his death is to be felt by the Chorus of the women of Canterbury who are the victims of "various oppression" (Eliot (1969), p. 239) and who fear the future as something beyond their control:

> We wait, we wait,
> And the saints and martyrs wait, for those who shall be martyrs and saints.
> Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen
> Who do, some well, some ill, planning and guessing,
> Having their aims which turn in their hands in the pattern of time ...
> For us, the poor, there is no action,
> But only to wait and to witness.
>
> (Eliot (1969), p. 240)

Williams has little to say about the connection between martyrdom and the philosophy of Christianity in this context, and this is perhaps why he shifts the debate to the notion of Becket as scapegoat. However, more recently, in his book *Tragedy* Terry Eagleton, rather as in Paulo Passolini's film *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, cites Albert Camus' reformulation of the crucifixion of Christ as "as staging a clash between a justified act of revolt and an indispensable framework of order." (Eagleton (2020), p. 178) Behind this formulation lies the spectre, perhaps also the structure, of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Williams is less concerned with some of Eliot's other plays, especially *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party,* though he discerns a weakened form of the scapegoat formula which he observed in *Murder in the Cathedral*. In all these plays, but especially in *The Cocktail Party*, "the martyr, the life sacrificed, is not at the centre of the play;" indeed, the centre "now, is the common condition, seen not so much in the alternative of bestiality as in the more negotiable alternative of the trivial round which gives the play its title." (Eliot (1969), p. 163) We are here in the trivial world of J. Alfred Prufrock for whom tragic action is an unrealisable fantasy, and where the life of an entire society is measured out in coffee spoons. But the point is, surely, that despite this obvious diminution of attention to the tragic protagonist Eliot persists in using the basic forms of classical tragedy as essential elements of structure, and they are at their most unstable in *The Family Reunion* with the

opportune appearances of the Eumenides, whose disruptive energies underpin the urbane familial relationships that the play proceeds to unravel.

Williams is critical of *The Cocktail Party* precisely because it never quite rises beyond the "social world of temporary relationships, transience and bright emptiness," even though he believes that Eliot tries to connect "the essential triviality of this life to the particular place and the people as to a common human condition." Indeed, he argues that the play's "evident delight in its chosen particulars" sets up a tension between structure and tone, with the former "dissenting" while the latter "accepts." (p. 164) While the traditional pattern of the "Christian tradition of sacrifice and redemption," towards which the reported horrific death in the Christian village of Kinkanja of Celia Copplestone gestures, is presented as residually tragic, this "controlling structure of feeling" is replaced by another that turns out to be "a socially modulated resignation." (p. 166) Thus, Eliot's apparent preservation of a singular structure of tragedy in *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*, conflicts with its social content to the point where the drama itself never quite rises above the prosaic. His characters represent a particular social class and therefore fall short of the status accorded to a more general 'humanity.'

DISMANTLING TRAGEDY

T.S. Eliot is writing out of a version of tragedy that is as comfortable in the domain of the novel as it is in that of the drama. Steiner and Williams may disagree about the *discourse* of tragedy but they do not seek to challenge it as one or more modes of experience. However, two modern theatrical practitioners push the concept of tragedy in very different directions, to the point where Williams can conclude his analysis with a chapter on Brecht that he entitles "The Rejection of Tragedy." We shall come to the more recent example of this, Augusto Boal, in due course, but for the moment let us concentrate first on Arthur Miller's notion of the 'common man' and on Brecht's objections to the Aristotelian model of theatre, both of which have proved influential across centuries.

Arthur Miller's short essay on "Tragedy and the Common Man" argues that the 'common man' is "an apt subject for tragedy" because 'modern psychiatry' bases "its analysis upon classical foundations, such

as the Oedipus and the Orestes complexes." (Miller (1994), p. 3) He
suggests, not unlike Strindberg, that the pattern of tragedy derives from
the trans-historical migration of classical forms from one era to another,
but he also holds on to the singular view in which "the tragic feeling is
evoked when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay
down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal
dignity." (p. 4) From this Miller concludes that "[t]ragedy, then, is the
consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly." (p.
4) In his essay on "The Family in Modern Drama" Miller addresses the
important question of form, between the pressures that realism imposes
upon dramatic form, and what it exerts upon poetry. He concludes, in a
slightly more emended version of 'tragedy,' with the suggestion that "it
is the everlastingly sought balance between order and the need of our
souls for freedom; the private lives and the life of the generality of men
which is our society and our world." (Miller (1965), p. 233)

By bringing the 'common man' into the equation Miller simply refocuses
the generality of tragedy as a struggle between 'man' in the general sense,
and those forces beyond his control, although in the two essays in question
he is not explicit about those forces. In plays such as *The Death of a Salesman*
or *All My Sons* the forces are both secular and explicit, but the question
nevertheless remains: do they correspond in magnitude to the 'fates' of clas-
sical tragedy, and, indeed, should they? Moreover – and this is a question to
which Steiner responds in the negative – is tragedy possible in a society that
is in principle democratic? Miller's depiction of Willy Loman in *The Death of
a Salesman* raises the question of whether his protagonist is possessed of suf-
ficient status to rise to the level of the tragic, or whether all that he elicits by
way of emotional response is pathos. The social forces to which Loman is
exposed are considerable, in that they shape his character and his interactions
with those around him. He is torn between a self-image that relies upon a
fantasy (the American dream of success) and a reality that undermines that
ideal. Willy's suicide is a selfless attempt to provide for his partly dysfunc-
tional family but it exposes the emptiness and the anonymity at the heart of
a democratic competitive culture that defies ordinary human understanding.
In the "Requiem" to the play, Willy's wife Linda exposes the final tragic
irony of her husband's death:

> I don't know what it is, but I can't cry. I don't understand it. Why did
> you ever do that? Help me, Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that

you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you. Willy, dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. *A sob rises in her throat.* We're free and clear. *Sobbing more fully released*: We're free ... *Biff comes slowly toward her.* We're free ... We're free ... *Biff lifts her to her feet and moves out up right with her in his arms. Linda sobs quietly. Bernard and Charley come together and follow them, followed by Happy. Only the music of the flute is left on the darkening stage as over the house the hard towers of the apartment buildings rise into sharp focus.*

<div align="right">(Miller (1975), pp. 256–7)</div>

Is Willy Loman's suicide an example of someone who acts "against the scheme of things that degrades them," and can we really say that "from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us" emerges "the terror and fear that is classically associated with tragedy?" (p. 4) In his essay Miller goes a little further suggesting that

> If it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.

<div align="right">(p. 7)</div>

In addition to a fundamental humanism that tragedy exposes, Miller is conscious of the gap between what the play offers, and his own rhetorical appeal to the very notion of classical tragedy that his commitment to 'the common man' implies. He ends, therefore, with a reference to "we who are without kings" (p. 7) as an acknowledgement of the need to update the concept of tragedy.

In another essay, "The Shadows of the Gods" which reflects on the economic turmoil of what Miller calls "our Greek year," 1929, he argues that "a reality had been secretly accumulating its climax according to its hidden laws to explode illusion at the proper time." (p. 177) The economic forces at work are here translated into "the big gods" who represent "the hidden laws of fate," but Miller's enquiry does not stop there. The laws of fate may be hidden from common view, but their

operations were what stimulated the enquiring dramatist to interrogate "process" and "context." (p. 178) In order to understand the catastrophe of 1929 Miller needed to engage "the inner laws of reality," a process which defined his "impression" both of the particular historical conjuncture *and* of "dramatic structure." (p. 179) Here the artist becomes "the destroyer of chaos" who is made "privy to the councils of the hidden gods who administer the hidden laws that bind us all and destroy us if we do not know them." (p. 180) The artist's 'religion' is, Miller suggests, without gods, but it nevertheless possesses "godlike powers," that comprised the "economic crisis and political imperatives which had twisted, torn, eroded, and marked everyone I laid eyes on." (p. 181) We are, of course, familiar with the symbolism here, which rises to the surface in times of what appear to be repeated crises: phrases such as 'the global economy,' forces beyond the control of politicians, all of which lend themselves to becoming identified as 'fate.' Indeed, economists and historians dedicate their enquiries to identifying laws of causality in which individuals, political decisions, systemic shifts and the 'myths' that sustain them are all deeply implicated. They all impinge directly on the concept of tragedy, and it would seem that in order to approach 'modern' tragedy in the sense that Miller and Williams define it, we may need to go much further than simply resurrecting and translating categories of thought and feeling that take us back to Aristotle and to the conservative notion of tragedy as a singular event.

BRECHT AGAINST ARISTOTLE

Raymond Williams associates Bertold Brecht with two kinds of "rejection of tragedy," both located in what he takes to be a crucial "response to suffering." (Williams (1966), p. 190) Both depend, as Williams observes, on the *distance* of the spectator from suffering. In the first case familiarity leads to complacency and indifference, but the alternative is to encourage a mode of spectatorship that Brecht identified as "thinking *above* the flow of the play [that] is more important than thinking from *within* the flow of the play." (p. 193) In his account of "The Literarization of the Theatre (notes to the *Threepenny Opera*)" Brecht resisted the idea that "the text must express everything within its own confines," and he continued:

> This way of subordinating everything to a single idea, this passion for propelling the spectator along a single track where he can look neither right nor left, up nor down, is something that the new school of play – writing must reject.
>
> (Willett (1978), p. 44)

What Brecht resists is the 'singularity' associated with classical tragedy, preferring a level of complexity that is closer to social reality and to which the artist must respond.

In *The Messingkauf Dialogues* in an early exchange between the Dramaturg and the Philosopher, Brecht is quite specific in his objection to the Aristotelian notion of tragedy. The Philosopher argues that "The ancients thought that the object of tragedy was to arouse pity and terror," and he continues, "That could still be a desirable object, if pity were taken to mean pity for people and terror of people." (Brecht (1965), p. 31) He goes on to observe that "The causes of a lot of tragedies lie outside the power of those who suffer them, so it seems," but he then insists that "Nothing human can possibly lie outside the powers of humanity, and such tragedies have human causes." (p. 32) In his "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" Brecht went on to enumerate a number of its characteristics; for example, "The human being is the object of the enquiry," "he is alterable and able to alter" and we should think of "man as a process" whose "social being determines thought" and for whom "reason" is emphasised over "feeling." (Willett (1978), p. 37) This is not unlike Miller's account of 'process' except that Brecht takes its consequences in terms of politics and dramaturgy much further.

Brecht's theatre requires a different kind of narration, but also a different kind of acting, something that discourages audience identification, and invites active critical engagement with what is being represented onstage. In his *A Short Organum for the Theatre* he argues:

> The theatre as we know it shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium). Oedipus, who offended against certain principles underlying the society of his time, is executed; the gods see to that; they are beyond criticism. Shakespeare's great solitary figures, bearing on their breast the star of their fate, carry through with irresistible force their

futile and deadly outburst; they prepare their own downfall; life, not death, becomes obscene as they collapse; the catastrophe is beyond criticism. Human sacrifices all round! Barbaric delights! We know that the barbarians have their art. Let us create another.

(p. 189)

Leaving aside the factual error in the claim that Oedipus is executed, Brecht lays down a challenge to the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis* as a rebalancing of the spectator's emotions (a balance that Miller approves of) that diverts any attention from the possibility of criticising the catastrophe. The historicisation of the myths and rituals that lay behind classical Greek tragedy seeks to reverse the practice of universalising any essence that can be extracted from them. Indeed, Brecht counsels us to

drop our habit of taking different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple.

(p. 190)

It is this identification that he sought to discourage since it is the point where "the critical attitude begins." (p. 190)

The kind of tragedy that Brecht rejected is precisely the one that critics such as George Steiner believed was no longer possible in the modern world. The ancient Greek infrastructure of myth, subjected to critical analysis might be thought to attract another term that comes out of Brecht's explicitly Marxist lexicon: ideology. His logic depends on the claim that the forces that motivate human behaviour are capable of rational analysis, and that the spectator needs to *look through* the representation to causes that can be corrected. Here the completed Aristotelian 'action' and the emotional engagement that it encourages, together with the balance that its completion emphasises, are fragmented and subjected to critical analysis. To some extent, Miller's association of tragedy with "the common man" and with human questions of causality gesture in this direction, but do not go far enough. The important point to emphasise here is that these shifts of interpretation require new definitions of 'tragedy' and a refocusing of its emphases.

ST. JOAN OF THE STOCKYARDS, MOTHER COURAGE AND GALILEO

We can get a clearer idea of what Brecht understands by tragedy by looking a little more closely at three of his plays, all of which engage with issues that can be identified as 'tragic.' *St. Joan of the Stockyards* was written in 1929–31, the period during which Arthur Miller's consciousness of issues of causality brought into alignment economics and dramatic structure. Brecht's play is about 'process,' about how religion and economics mutually support each other to maintain wealth and poverty and about how even the most revolutionary of gestures can be manipulated to support a particular conservative view of tragedy.

In a battle between the "well-known meat baron and philanthropist" Pierpont Mauler and the factory owner Lennox in *St Joan of the Stockyards* the victims are the starving workers. Philanthropy thrives on charity and the protection of the law, but the world is "like a slaughterhouse" in which the poor turn on each other in frustration. Into this situation comes Joan, the figurehead of the Black Straw Hats, whose mission is "to reintroduce / God." (Brecht (1962) p. 7) Her message to the starving Workers is to redirect their attention to the compensations of religion:

> just eat some hot soup and then everything will look real different, but please give a little thought to Him who bestows it upon you. And when you think that way you will see that this is really the complete solution: Strive upwards, not downwards. Work for a good position up above, not here below.

> (p. 9)

Unwittingly, at this point, Joan is the instrument of an ideology that counsels inaction, but faced with a situation in which the poor are assumed to be victims of their own prejudices and short-sightedness, Joan wants "to know" (p. 13) why they behave in the way that they do. She is warned by her colleagues not to "mingle in the quarrels of this world" but she insists: "I want to know." (p. 14) The knowledge that she seeks is dangerous and her investigations will uncover the very economic laws that produce the poverty of the Workers.

While the Small Speculators lament the inscrutability of "the eternal laws / Of human economy" (p. 66), Joan finally comes to realise how the system works:

> I see this system and on the surface
> It has long been familiar to me, but not
> In its inner meaning!
>
> (p. 77)

Her gradual descent into the depths is accompanied by Pierpont Mauler's philanthropic gifts to the Black Straw Hats resulting in a scandalous rebalancing of the social order in which force protects the economic hierarchy of slaughterers, stockbreeders and wholesalers against the violence of the Workers. But as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, Mauler "is ready-made for the Aristotelian theatre of sympathy and fellow feeling" (Jameson (2000), p. 157) and he ultimately fashions Joan in his own Aristotelian image. Religion is subsumed into a reactionary order that will ultimately engulf Joan herself, while she is made to feel guilty on account of her own inadequacies. She dwells upon her inaction and her failure to change the dominant order:

> Again the world runs
> Its ancient course unaltered.
> When it was possible to change it
> I did not come; when it was necessary
> That I, little person, should help
> I stayed on the sidelines.
>
> (p. 105)

The play ends with Joan's revolutionary voice drowned out, and her death is co-opted into a reactionary celebration of a deeply tainted 'humanity.' The system itself, with its conflicts and contradictions is what *produces* a particular kind of tragedy that threatens to mask the inner workings of the social order. The tragedy is not the death of the person Joan, but that of the repeated frustration of attempts to understand and transform the economic order in the interests of a more fundamental humanism that is predicated upon a fair and equitable human society. The tragedy is that even in her death Joan's public image can

be manipulated both by the forces of capitalism *and* by the representatives of religion working hand in hand.

If *St. Joan of the Stockyards* reveals deconstructively the inner workings of a society that can sacrifice individuals with impunity and represent the sacrifice as a certain kind of 'tragedy,' *Mother Courage* emphasises a stubborn human persistence in which the tragic protagonist is defined by those forces that consume her and her family.

In the Preface to his translation of *Mother Courage and Her Children* Eric Bentley cites Sir Herbert Read's comment that although "[w]e live in a tragic age, we are unable to express ourselves in tragic poetry" and that "[o]ur fatalism gives us a stoic appearance, but it is not genuine stoicism. It is a dull animal endurance of misfortune, unfocused and unexpressed." Read also notes that "[m]odern war in all its destructiveness is a dumb acceptance of this anonymous fate." (Brecht (1969), p. vii) This partially addresses the content of Brecht's play, but it does not address what Jameson calls the "ambivalent relationship to money-making" that "is not foreign to the ambivalence so many readers have attributed to this 'tragic' drama in general." (Jameson (2000), p. 148)

Written in the three years directly leading up to Word War II, *Mother Courage* is offered as a "Chronicle" of the Thirty Years War and is set in the years 1621–36. The play shows how the war consumes Mother Courage's children but subsumes her into its commercial practices. There is human sacrifice in the play, as evidenced in the price that her daughter Katrin pays for warning the town of an imminent attack. In scene 11 the Peasant Woman's ineffectual appeal to religion: "O Lord; we are in Thy hands, our cattle, our farm, and the town too, we're all in Thy hands, and the foe is nigh unto the walls with all his power" (Brecht (1969), p. 76) is set against Katrin's fatal gesture which saves the town from the predations of war. Katrin's is one kind of courage in the face of all odds, but Mother Courage's courage is another. The war is the fate that drags her repeatedly into its dangers and it requires a particular kind of courage – sometimes expressed as fortitude, at others ironically as a dehumanising compulsion – to continue. Jameson sees the struggle as being between Mother Courage's desire to preserve her 'capital' (the wagon) against the evanescent power of 'money' played out against the backdrop of a never-ending war. (pp. 148–9) Her residual humanity is slowly leeched away in the compulsion to survive a war that "takes hold and will not quit," but in the face of disaster she

remains resilient, if not entirely optimistic: "And though you may not long survive / Get out of bed and look alive." (p. 81)

Mother Courage and Her Children is a tragedy that engulfs an entire society. Though she is the eponymous protagonist she continually blocks our sympathies because she is harnessed to the wagon and to the war. Her resilience is fatally shackled to an engine that is both violent *and* commercial, and the ambivalence that she represents extends far beyond her 'character.' Indeed, her psychology is determined by the context in which she is embedded, and the 'action' such as it is comprises a series of open-ended episodes that fly directly in the face of any Aristotelian prescription of 'singularity.' Whereas *St. Joan of the Stockyards* deconstructs Aristotelian tragedy, *Mother Courage and Her Children* rewrites the classical conception of the 'family' at the same time that it challenges the centrality of 'action' and to this extent it is an anti-Aristotelian tragedy.

The Life of Galileo, written at about the same time as *Mother Courage and Her Children*, pushes this analysis further. Indeed, in his notes to the play Brecht comments: "So, from the point of view of the theatre, the question will arise whether *The Life of Galileo* is to be presented as a tragedy, or as an optimistic play." (Brecht (1971) p. 10) Galileo is precisely the opposite of Arthur Miller's "character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity." (Miller (1975), p. 4) Galileo is caught up in a momentous 'action,' "the dawn of a new age," (Brecht (1971), p. 11) and despite his imprisonment, he manages to complete his 'Discorsi' which his student, Andrea Sarti, smuggles out of prison. Moreover, his confession in prison to his one-time student reads like a moment of self-realisation that amounts to a failure to take a heroic stand against power:

> I maintain that the only purpose of science is to ease the hardship of human existence. If scientists, intimidated by self-seeking people in power, are content to amass knowledge for the sake of knowledge, then science can become crippled, and your new machines will represent nothing but new means of oppression. With time you may discover all that is to be discovered, and your progress will only be a progression away from mankind.
>
> (Brecht (1971), p. 118)

It is Andrea Sarti who *wants* Galileo to become a tragic hero, to stand up for 'truth' in the face of ecclesiastical oppression, but once Galileo recants his heretical views Andrea laments "Unhappy the land that has no heroes!" (p. 107) Galileo's response is one that flies directly in the face of one of the Aristotelian conditions of tragedy: "No. Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes." (p. 108) What Brecht's play explores are the negotiations and the compromises that are necessary conditions for the advancement of knowledge. Galileo is shown to be embedded in the ordinary day-to-day sensuous business of living while advancements in science are perpetually subject to political and religious pressures. The dawn of a new age carries with it the residual forces that threaten to divert the impact of new knowledges and redirect them. At the points of emergence, advances are never clear or pure, and what might be hailed, or, indeed, welcomed in some quarters may lead to negative outcomes. A failure of science to engage with society leads ultimately to destruction, and the inadvertent consequence of Galileo's scientific investigations is the atomic bomb. In other words, science itself and the necessary knowledge that it generates can be diverted in ways that will prove tragic for society. The episodic life of the scientist, embedded in a society that is in the process of change is one that requires compromises to be made that do not always result in improvement. The play explores the tensions that result from a desire for new knowledge against the superstitious comforts of the old order. And Galileo represents those tensions. What is at stake is both a birth and a death, the juxtaposition of both an optimistic and a pessimistic view, precisely the kind of tension that we associate with tragedy, although not quite in the form that we might expect. Thus, in a much more sophisticated way than in *St Joan of the Stockyards*, or even *Mother Courage, The Life of Galileo* deploys the materials of tragedy in the interests of a critique of tragedy. Galileo is both hero and anti-hero, a figure who sacrifices personal dignity for an objective which, it turns out, is ambiguous. The Discorsi' provides the means to improve society by exploring new knowledge, but it also threatens the destruction of the very society that makes scientific investigation possible.

All three plays explore in different ways the mechanisms of affect by inviting audiences to resist the kind of response prescribed by Aristotle. If we submerge ourselves in the plights of their protagonists then we are in danger of missing the manner of their production. Joan's humanity

becomes the means whereby Pierpont Mauler can sustain his social position, whereas Mother Courage's defence of her dwindling family becomes, paradoxically, a courageous compulsion that drives her to follow the war that gives her a living. Galileo's 'humanity,' on the other hand, comprises a series of impurities that force him continually into compromise. In short, we are never allowed to get too close to the 'characters' since critical distance is essential to an understanding of how they are shaped by the society that surrounds them, and to the fostering of a desire for improvement.

AUGUSTO BOAL AND TRAGEDY

But if Brecht is critical of the dynamics of Aristotelian tragedy and the balance that it produces which reaffirms the status quo, then Augusto Boal's *The Theater of the Oppressed* (1979) offers a systematic challenge to the entire Aristotelian edifice. Boal begins by tracing the Aristotelian model of tragedy which "imitates those actions of man which have the good as their goal," the highest goal being "the political good" which in turn "is justice." (p. 21) He identifies 'justice' as "proportionality" and he glosses Aristotle's idea of tragedy as the imitation of "The actions of a man's rational soul, his passions turned into habits, in his search for happiness, which consists in virtuous behaviour, remote from the extremes, whose supreme good is justice and whose maximum expression is the Constitution." (Boal (1979), pp. 23–4)

The Aristotelian model, according to Boal, is designed "to provoke catharsis" (p. 25) and thereby fulfils a "repressive function" that has bedevilled theatre ever since. Tragedy intervenes to correct any failure to observe the Law and it does so "through purification of the extraneous undesirable element which prevents the character from achieving his ends." (p. 32) Boal identifies that element as *hamartia*, the one 'tragic flaw,' an "anti-constitutional flaw" (p. 37) that must be eliminated as a barrier preventing the hero from conforming to "the ethos of the society." (p. 34)

Boal's conclusion is stark and resembles to some extent Steiner's claim that tragedy only exists in certain, very specific circumstances. However, for Steiner, society's failure to produce the conditions of stability and order that *produce* tragedy is an indication of its 'death' as an artistic form. In Boal's terms, then, Steiner's lament of the death of tragedy

might be seen in terms of a *failure* of coercion, and of the conditions in which the tragic hero confronts the constitution that has been violated. That failure might be the consequence of religious faith in a hereafter, or the thought that metaphysical forces can be rationalised as causes that can be overcome by political action. Boal's objective is not to preserve what he takes to be an outmoded form of tragedy, but to encourage "the spectator to transform his society, to engage in revolutionary action" which would require "another poetics." (p. 47) He does not rule out emotions such as empathy, but he is concerned to focus on what stimulates it in the dramatic representation itself. He asks:

> How can one fail to be moved when Mother Courage loses her sons, one by one, in the war? Inevitably the spectator is moved to tears. But the emotion caused by ignorance must be avoided: let no one weep over the 'fate' that took Mother Courage's sons from her! Let one cry rather with anger against war and against the commerce of war, because it is this commerce that takes away the sons of Mother Courage.
>
> (Boal (1979), p. 103)

What Brecht and Boal insist on is that the spectator does not identify completely with the tragic protagonist, but that he/she "reserves the right to think for himself (sic), often in opposition to the character." (p. 122) The result is not the restoration of a 'balance' that might propose some compensation for the operation of a supernatural 'Fate,' but a recognition of social and economic conditions that might engulf the dramatis persona, that expose forces that can be altered or transformed. Boal is aware that Brecht does not always manage to produce a form of drama that guards against a traditional reading, but both are committed to challenging the traditional Aristotelian narrative of tragedy which has prevailed through the ages.

   Neither Brecht nor Boal underestimated the difficulty of revolution, though their deployment of theatrical form to 'rehearse' it is important. Both opposed the Aristotelian model of theatre because they regarded it as regressive and conservative. Both were concerned to rewrite traditional dramatic narratives and to explore how they were utilised as a means of obstructing criticism and progress. In many respects they

advanced critique much further than Raymond Williams who, as we saw earlier, was deeply critical of the conservative strain in criticism represented by Steiner which lamented the passing of traditional explanations of tragedy.

8

TRAGEDY, THE POST-MODERN AND THE POST-HUMAN

Throughout this book we have observed time and again that tragedy provides an explanatory narrative for a particular kind of human experience. Although that narrative might be inflected differently at different historical moments, the conservative view is that tragedy thrives only in certain circumstances, and that human history in the West reveals a decline in those circumstances. However, there is an alternative view that tragedy is not some essential quality that is handed down from generation to generation, but that it is capable of endless transformations that are entirely dependent on the particular structures present in any society at any given time. Even so, what both versions have in common is the emphasis that tragedy places on 'Man' as an abstract universal category and the conditions under which 'he' (it is usually the masculine pronoun) lives and is prepared to live. In ancient Greek tragedy that definition of the human emerged from the protagonist's engagement with the superhuman (the Gods), and it is the resultant tension between the two forces that has provided the parameters of a narrative that has been repeated from generation to generation. It is possible to discern a tradition that, whatever its emphases, revisits that

narrative, and adapts it to its present concerns. Repetition may be important here, but, as with all repetition, it is accompanied by innovation that gives to each instance new and fresh meaning.

What the Renaissance and the eighteenth century picked up from the tradition was a narrative of what it is to be human, within a context that signals a totality, and a term that has not been easy to define, 'humanism.' Whereas the Aristotelian model of tragedy emphasised an action that concluded in a 'balance' of forces that signalled the relationship between the protagonist and the wider metaphysical context, the Renaissance placed 'Man' firmly at the centre of the universe, and justified his position in generally Christian terms. Thus, Sir Walter Raleigh's *The History of the World* (1618) could begin in the Garden of Eden, as does Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (c.1486) (Davies (2008), pp. 95ff.) where its claim as a foundational text in the emergence of 'humanism' is based upon the foregrounding of the representatively human Adam. As Tony Davies observes,

> the Oration's fame, and its extraordinary prominence in later accounts of humanism, derive from the first few pages, in which the biblical Creator of Genesis announces to the newly formed Adam that he will stand apart from the rest of creation by virtue of the special freedom and versatility with which he has been endowed. Whereas all other creatures are circumscribed by the natural disposition conferred upon them, Man alone has the capacity to choose his own nature.
>
> (Davies (2008), p. 96)

As long as the relationship between the human and the divine remains stable the tension between them is minimised, though not entirely obliterated. However, crisis is reached when the two drift apart, and we can see that happening in the plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, Webster and their contemporaries. In plays like *The White Devil* (1609) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612–13) the Machiavellian world of contemporary Italian politics, with its instrumental rationality, opens up irresolvable fissures in any unifying narrative with the result that the human actors are forced to rely on themselves and their interactions with each other, perverse or otherwise. The tension arises between meaning that can be imposed from without, and a defiant insistence upon being in the face of an assault that has a lasting effect on only

some of the observers of suffering. The pronouncement of Webster's Duchess that "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (Webster (1964), 4.2.142) comes in the face of her tormentor Bosola's definition of mortality and of the meaninglessness of human life:

> Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy: – what's this flesh? a little crudded milk, fantastical puff-paste; our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in; more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth-worms. Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison.
>
> (4.2.124–33)

And it is Bosola who is later tormented by the memory of the Duchess and attempts to compensate for her murder. In Renaissance tragedy, as Jonathan Dollimore observes, "a regressive pessimism" that "resembles the familiar tradition of *contemptus mundi*" mutates into an "*anomie*" because it lacks "that tradition's compensating faith in the eternal." (Dollimore (2004), p. 21) In Webster we see the collapse of a moral universe and the consequences for human behaviour which is fickle, often compulsive and, at times, irrational, and where it is not easy to distinguish between categories such as 'good' and 'evil'. But the particular vision of the human condition that it proposes suggests that looking back on the Renaissance it is possible to extrapolate from its historical complexities a humanism that in retrospect can be celebrated

Davies distinguishes between Renaissance humanism as an historical phenomenon, and its rediscovery in the nineteenth century as "an essential humanity unconditioned by time, place, or circumstance." (Davies (2008), p. 24) Although he does not address tragedy directly as a manifestation of this phenomenon, he is well aware of a narrative that departs from an account of 'Man' as "an essential starting-point" and engages with a *telos* which is "a destination, less a given set of intrinsic qualities than the goal of an epochal and never-to-be-completed process." (p. 31) Hugh Grady regards such transitional moments – and he pinpoints Greek and Renaissance tragedy as examples – as instances where "instrumental reason is challenging tradition, where mythos is

giving way to logos." (Grady (2005), pp. 28–31) The teleological impetus of the Aristotelian account of tragedy is *catharsis*. However, a tentative balance between forces that shape a moral universe, in forms such as the nineteenth-century novel (Davies cites Thomas Hardy and George Eliot as examples) indicate that what Davies refers to as these two versions of what he calls "the human condition" emerge. It is not my concern to replicate Davies' account of the complex history of humanism, or to foreground the syncretic way in which it has accumulated varying definitions as it has become subject to the materialist analysis of social, cultural, economic and philosophical pressures. In some respects the history of the emergence of humanism provides the context for the shifts of emphasis that I have tried to chart in earlier chapters. While elements of the narrative change in accordance with these constitutive pressures, the essential model has either been reaffirmed or challenged to the extent that conservative thinkers have been persuaded to lament the 'death' of tragedy while others have sought to provide alternative accounts that emphasise transformations of the tradition rather than a repetition of it. This is what Grady succinctly identifies as 'materialist.' (p.138) At the heart of the problem is what counts as, and how we access, knowledge of the 'human' and the extent to which it is *sui generis* subjected to metaphysical powers that help to shape ethical concerns, or whether the forces that contribute to the structures of thought are social, economic or cultural. At issue, also, is the nature of 'action': whether it exists as a category that simply subsumes external pressures that stimulate human desire and can be resolved, or whether its motivations are unstable, multidimensional and internal.

The shift from 'action' to 'character,' particularly during the Enlightenment and beyond, effectively modified and transformed the trajectory of tragedy from an aristocratic form which was exclusionary, to one in which it could be applied to 'the common man' and to the kind of individualism that we associate with the liberal humanist subject and with social and political formations such as capitalism. Of course, cultural critics such as Raymond Williams or theatre practitioners such as Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal were aware of the issues at stake, and sought to explain them in materialist terms which was why in *St. Joan of the Stockyards* Brecht could lay bare the way in which tragedy was ripe for appropriation and consumption as a production

designed to uphold and consolidate the interests of a ruling capitalist class. To this extent Davies' complex history of humanism comes to rest on two alternative narratives, the one abstract and essentialist – what he calls " the master narrative of transcendental Man" (Davies (2008), p. 141) and the other deconstructive and progressive where "identity" is a question of "movement, not destination," (p. 143) although at issue is also the question of what is considered important in human life, how tragedy "thematizes the contest between freedom and fate," as Terry Eagleton puts it, and how its "imaginary solution to a real contradiction plaguing modernity" turns out to be "the very prototype of ideology." (Eagleton (2003), p. 119) Thus, in addition to asking to what extent social conditions can or cannot be changed, tragedy becomes a political and aesthetic means to pinpoint what is considered important in human life, although it is frequently more tentative about *how* conditions can be changed.

Other challenges to humanism, however, have dwelt less on the problem of definition than on the challenges to the master narrative that sustains it, and the changes in emphasis of the concept of tragedy coincide to some extent with the larger pressure exerted by modernism on its content and its form. The application of tragic motifs to realist and surrealist modes of representation perform their own effects of destabilisation of the nature of 'Man,' the notion of what Peter Childs has described as "uncertainty in a godless universe" and the tension between "the constraints of convention" and "the drives of passion and black humour" that he pinpoints in the work of writers such as Samuel Beckett. (Childs (2017), p. 7) This also points in the direction of a further, more radical challenge that Raymond Williams formulates as a resistance to nineteenth-century realism which he describes as "a way of seeing the world in which it was possible to experience the quality of a whole way of life through the qualities of individual men and women." (Williams (1966), p. 139) Once any sense of that "whole way of life" dissolves then there develops a "radical uncertainty about the self" (p. 149), what Williams sees as "the final crisis of individualism, beyond the heroic deadlock of liberal tragedy, where the individual could pit himself against a total condition outside him, even at the risk of his life." (p. 151) Williams follows this crisis across the range of modern European drama, and he observes the adjustments made to the conservative model of tragedy that follow from it. However, since 1966

even more radical challenges have emerged, which bear the labels 'anti-humanism' or 'post-humanism,' both of which might accompany the category of 'anti-hero.'

ANTI-HUMANISM AND POST-HUMANISM

To take 'anti-humanism' first, this is the term that Rosi Braidotti deploys to describe the process of "delinking the human agent from this universalising posture, calling him to task, so to speak, on the concrete actions he is enacting," with the result that "[d]ifferent and sharper power relations emerge, once this formerly dominant subject is freed from his delusions of grandeur and is no longer allegedly in charge of historical progress." (Braidotti (2013), p. 24)

Braidotti goes on to observe the consequences of the challenge to "the human norm" that "stands for normality, normalcy and normativity" (p. 26):

> The awareness of the instability and lack of coherence of the narratives that compose social structures and relations, far from resulting in a suspension of political and moral action, become the starting point to elaborate new forms of resistance suited to the polycentric and dynamic structure of contemporary power.
>
> (pp. 26–7)

That "polycentric and dynamic structure" carries with it a serious challenge to the unitary subject (and to agency in tragic 'action'), to the extent that "the focus is shifted accordingly from unitary to nomadic subjectivity, thus running against the grain of high humanism and its contemporary variations." (p. 49) "Nomadic subjectivity" presents a very real challenge to, and indeed removes, "the obstacle of self-centred individualism" that has become the cornerstone of humanism (pp. 49–50) and replaces it with a more complex and variable model of causality that requires "an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others." (p. 50)

Braidotti's 'nomadic subjectivity' derives its force from the challenge mounted to the principles of meta-discourse and meta-narrative by the French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, whose *The Post-modern Condition* seeks to augment the claim that "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of

whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation." (Lyotard (1984), p. 37) The result, post World War II, is a shift of emphasis "from the ends of action to its means" (p. 37); but more importantly, "the advanced liberal capitalism" characterised by a Keynesian economics *or* its communist alternative, appears unable to withstand, or compensate for, "the decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives of speculation and emancipation." (p. 38) Williams lays the groundwork for this radical assault in his account of the artistic representation of what he called "personal impenetrable worlds" (Williams (1966), p. 151) and the illusions that sustain them and that are projected back into a now fragmented society. The assault on the 'human' that Braidotti charts leaves death as the only reality which, as Williams observes, "significantly often, is violent and arbitrary." (pp. 152–3) We shall see the results of this shortly in our discussion of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*.

Let us focus on Braidotti's much more positive account of the posthuman as a starting point for an ethics of a "non-unitary subject" that "proposes an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism." (Braidotti (2013), pp. 49–50) This posthuman dispersal of the self into its intersectional fragments raises fundamental questions concerning the motivation of human actions, and for Braidotti the first step to an ethics that this "nomadic subjectivity" breeds is a recognition of the right to existence of each fragment. The question then arises of who does the recognising, and what tensions and oppositions might flow from that process of recognition. Here the placing of hitherto marginalised positions on a political agenda involves acts of recognition: of the different narratives that now comprise the human: feminism, psychoanalysis, social critique, but also of other forms of life that are not human and that can only be humanised by acts of projection. In the post-human world where bodies can be altered physically, and where the various demands of a biosphere need to be taken into consideration, the result is a decentring of the human, and a refocusing of ethics to take full account of the different forms of 'otherness' that exert pressure upon the "non-unitary" and "nomadic" subject. In the era of the post-human actions can have unforeseen consequences, as the current debate about climate change reveals, while the debate about transgender people presents a very real challenge to the traditional

definitions of sexual identity. Fragmentation, which Lyotard regards as an indication of modernism precedes post-modernism which he defines as the invention of "allusions to the conceivable which cannot be represented." (Lyotard (1984), p. 81) He formulates the problem as a tension between the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, where the one strives for autonomy, while the other produces the notion of a totalising unity which is "a transcendental illusion." Lyotard concludes:

> We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of desire for a return of terror, for the realisation of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.
>
> (pp. 81–2)

What Lyotard labels as "the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible" finds its apotheosis in the traditional emphasis placed in tragedy upon final resolutions of the disruption of order. Grady is right to suggest that our knowledge of ancient Greece or Renaissance Europe flies in the face of these tidy resolutions, and he wants to know what order has been re-established at the end of Euripides' *Medea* or Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*. (Grady (2005), p. 135) The same question might be posed in relation to Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* or Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Lyotard pinpoints the political risks that follow from "totality" since he hears in it the threat of "totalitarianism," while the focus on "the unrepresentable" forces us back to the question of representation and the extent to which it is instrumental in shaping the operations of ideology. Lyotard's pluralising of knowledge and Braidotti's nomadic subject emphasise different aspects of the same phenomenon, and they force us to reconsider the traditional simplification of the relationship in tragedy between action and character. While the post-modern releases a plethora of narratives, but abolishes meta-narrative, the post-human explores the consequences of plurality and what it might mean for the knowledge that tragedy provides. Lyotard's and Braidotti's enthusiastic embrace of plurality may, at the end of the day,

give us a comic world, but there is a negative side to fragmentation, to the power of illusion and to the fact of death, all of which are present in Lyotard's 'war' on totality. This is not so much evidence of a desire for order, as a realisation of the discord that follows from the untuning of the principle of a moral order.

SAMUEL BECKETT: *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is described as a "tragi-comedy in two acts," and the first principle that the play violates is that of 'action.' It begins with Estragon trying and failing to take off his boot, and, after a second attempt, coming to the conclusion that there is "Nothing to be done." (Beckett (1990), p. 11) He is reunited with his companion, Vladimir and they discuss briefly the violent world in which they live, before Vladimir declares: "When I think of it … all these years … but for me … where would you be …? [*Decisively.*] You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it." (p. 11)

Both men have a limited perception of their bleak surroundings and they are restricted both by their immediate experience of it and by their occasional and often imperfect recollection of the past. They are largely confined to immediate bodily sensations and conditions and Estragon's observation that Valdimir "always" waits "till the last moment" prompts the incomplete recollection of an Old Testament quotation: "Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?" (p. 12) The full quotation from Proverbs 13.12 is "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick; but when the desire cometh *it is* a tree of life." There is a tree on the stage in this scene, but as a representation of life it is minimal, and the desire that both characters evince is neither philosophical nor metaphysical. This is also the first indication we get of failed memory, of a failure to recall a narrative that is part of a more complete and profound mythos. Here the partial thought is prompted by reference to an immediate bodily sensation: for Estragon, his entire world is focused on the pain of removing his boot, while for Vladimir it is the constant reminder of a urinary problem that obstructs his capacity to think, to reflect and even to laugh. In Beckett's world mythos and logos, and any struggle that they might represent, are reduced to the physical immediacy of struggle, and by what turns out to be an illusory expectation that their condition might change when Godot arrives. Indeed, the

sickness that the imperfect recollection of the metaphysical conditions of hope might alleviate is all that remains, so that "life" is reduced to the difficulty of satisfying bodily desires. Moreover, what they may attempt in the way of action is frustrated: Vladimir cannot laugh at his condition, and Estragon cannot think because of the discomfort of his feet.

It is Vladimir who prompts recollection, but when he asks Estragon, "Did you ever read the Bible?" and "Do you remember the Gospels?," the response he gets is one of irrelevant triviality:

> I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.
>
> (p. 13)

Undeterred, Vladimir perseveres with an attempt to recollect an important part of the narrative of Christian redemption but its truth is dispersed in the varying narratives of the Gospels, suggesting that redemption itself is uncertain, and that the only reality is death. All of these elements appear as part of the ethos of tragedy, but in Beckett's play they simply fail to cohere as a definitive tragic 'action.' The play pushes beyond the boundaries of modernity to offer sardonic laughter as an inadequate panacea for a bare life that is tragic because it is inescapable. Vladimir and Estragon cannot move because they are "Waiting for Godot," and they can only alleviate the agony and the boredom of that waiting by amusing themselves; they also amuse their audience, who are also waiting for something to happen but never does and who are diverted by what they see and hear onstage.

In the first part of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) the elements that appear in Beckett's play are formulated in a series of nostalgic questions that point towards a quasiBiblical past whose remains in the immediate aftermath of a world war are nothing but "broken images." (Eliot (1963), p. 61) Eliot's poem deals with devastation and loss, whereas Beckett's two characters, preoccupied with simply passing the time while they wait, seem almost unaware of the wreckage that they inhabit. For Eliot it is the searing loss of ritual in modern life destroyed by the carnage of World War I that is crucial, whereas for Beckett's characters such ritualistic validation of existence is without meaning in

a post-Holocaust post nuclear world, and is reduced to a state where devastation and loss give way to diversion in which the light-hearted and the serious jostle for attention.

Into Beckett's tragic world of diversion come the figures of Pozzo and Lucky, the one driving the other on purposefully. The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is that of master and slave, although Pozzo's rationale for Lucky remaining with him appears to be hegemonic as well as coercive. Lucky's violent reaction to Estragon's offer to wipe away his tears prompts a philosophical observation of the balance of the world's suffering from Pozzo that is a key to the play's tone:

> The tears of the world are a constant quality. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. [*He laughs.*] Let us not speak ill of our generation, it is not unhappier than its predecessors. [*Pause.*] Let us not speak well of it either. [*Pause.*] Let us not speak of it at all. [*Pause. Judiciously.*] It is true the population has increased.
>
> (Beckett (1990), p. 33)

This debilitating relativism pervades the play and deprives it of any anchoring in essential meaning. Lucky's performance of 'thinking' makes a mockery of logos, just as Pozzo's mastery of his slave, and his reliance on superficial courtesies, makes a mockery of society and of relationships. The interlude, however much we may extract from it some allegorical meaning, is a means of passing the time (p. 46) but at the end of Act 1 we are left with the overwhelming feeling of "uncertainty" as Vladimir and Estragon express the desire to go, but remain.

This pattern is repeated in Act 2 only on the second appearance of Lucky and Pozzo the pair have become mutually dependent and the rope between them is shorter. Vladimir and Estragon's uncertainty about Pozzo's identity and their violence towards him in the face of his cries for help resurrect another Old Testament narrative of fratricidal violence as Estragon experiments with the names 'Abel' and 'Cain' and comes to the conclusion that Pozzo is "all humanity." (p. 78) In the second encounter Valdimir and Estragon try to piece together the experience of the first and they are puzzled by the deterioration in the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo, by their loss of faculties, but also by Pozzo's pathetic demand that he continue onwards. Pozzo and Lucky

allegorically represent 'change' but it is change within the confines of a relentless temporal continuity:

> Have you not done tormenting me with you accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? [*Calmer.*] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. [*He jerks the rope.*] On!
>
> (p. 83)

There is little that is positive in this version of the human condition and there is little in the way of compensation for suffering. The relationship between Vladimir and Estragon is one of persistent attraction and repulsion, while the mutual dependency of Pozzo and Lucky is, in their first appearance, disguised as a form of exploitation, and in their second appearance that exploitation becomes a relationship of necessity. Underneath this is a violence that has been present from time immemorial, and beneath that is a rhythm of permanent contingency without respite. Here the recollection of broken images offers no respite or compensation for suffering, since human survival can only cope with horror and catastrophe through a laughter that is wholly without power to compensate. In the bourgeois world of an exploitative individualism all humankind can do is wait for a death that is wholly without meaning. Here tragedy resides in the fact of human suffering aggravated further by a flickering memory resembling a bomb site that even the shards of a Christian narrative that remain cannot rebuild.

SARAH KANE: *PHAEDRA'S LOVE*

The traditional view of tragedy is that it is exhilarating. In the words of Eagleton, this view

> [begins] accordingly to sound just the thing to lift one's spirits after a bankruptcy or a bereavement, a tonic solution to one's ills. In this liberal humanist caricaturing of tragedy's undoubtedly creative

> powers, the fact that it deals in blasted hopes and broken lives is
> quickly forgotten.
>
> (Eagleton (2003), p. 25)

Sarah Kane's play *Blasted* (1995) deals directly with a fragmented and broken urban life lacking in any ethical or moral restraint and where violence can explode at any moment. A year later Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996) appeared, a play that we might expect to hark back to Euripides' *Hyppolytus,* although Seneca's *Phaedra* may provide a more recent link. The long history of this play charts various shifts in emphasis, beginning with the focus on Hippolytus and upon Phaedra's compulsive behaviour generated by the goddess Aphrodite who reveals in a prologue that she will use Phaedra as a means of punishing Hippolytus for his misogyny:

> I shall this day punish Hippolytus. I have long since come far with my
> plans, and I need a little further effort. One day when he came from
> Pittheus's house to the land of Pandion to witness and perform the
> august Mysteries, his father's high-born wife Phaedra saw him, and
> her heart was seized with a dreadful longing: this was my devising.
>
> (Euripides (2008), p.127)

Seneca's version of the play retitles it *Phaedra* and quickly formulates the action as a conflict between 'reason' and 'unreason' and makes of the goddess Venus, as the Nurse formulates it, a "vile fiction of unbridled lust"); the resulting "sickness" only "strikes where life is soft" and the Nurse asks:

> Why is pure love found under lowly roofs,
> And why do common people generally
> Have wholesome appetites where modest means
> Teach self-control – while wealth, propped up by power,
> Always asks more than its fair share of things?
>
> (Seneca (1966), p. 106)

Thomas Newton's Elizabethan translation retains Euripides' title, but blackens Phaedra's character considerably with the observation that she informs her husband Theseus that Hippolytus has raped her; this is how "The Argument" puts it:

> In the absence of Theseus his Father, it chaunced that his Stepmother
> Phaedra ardently enamored with his beawty and lusty age, enveigled
> him by all meanes shee coulde, to commit with her filthy, and mon-
> strous adultery. Whych her beastly, unchaste, and undutiful practise,
> he dutifully loathinge, shee turned hir former love into extreame
> hatred, and told her husband Theseus. At his returne home that his
> Sonne Hippolytus woulde have unlawfully layne with her.
>
> (Seneca (1927), p. 136)

While the burden of Seneca's play rests upon the decadent perversions of historical Rome, and on a misogyny that dates back to Hesiod's *Theogyny*, the interference of the gods is not entirely absent, as the narrative of Hippolytus's death as the result of the action of the god of the sea, Aegeus, makes clear. Racine's *Ph*èdre (1677) places the eponymous tragic heroine at the centre of the play, and in a preface to the play he noted that she "is neither entirely guilty nor altogether innocent." (Racine (1963), p. 145) Here the lie about Hippolytus's adultery is transferred to the Nurse (Oenone) and the play ends with Phaedra's death and Theseus's admission of his mistaken action in relation to his son.

All of this receives very little attention in Kane's *Phaedra's Love*. The Aristotelian framework which persists in earlier versions of the Hippolytus narrative is almost entirely dispensed with in Kane's play. Here the Theseus-Hippolyta-Phaedra narrative is reduced to the occasionally violent perversions of a radically dysfunctional aristocratic family for whom instant gratification is the norm. The first sight we have of Hippolytus is of a depressive who alleviates his boredom by watching violent films on television, eating junk food and engaging in pleasureless masturbation. There is nothing here beyond the immediate present and it is clear that disfunctionality is a feature of this royal household. The occupants seem both to revile each other but also to need each other in gestures that echo Beckett; an early scene between Phaedra and her daughter Strophe begins by rehearsing a motif of repulsion-attraction: "Go away, fuck off don't touch me don't talk to me stay with me." (Kane (2001), p. 69) By scene 5 Phaedra has committed suicide and Hippolytus is ready to turn himself in for allegedly having raped her. There are no gods in this play although while in prison there is a discussion between Hippolytus and a priest. The discussion revolves around sin, confession, repentance and forgiveness, but as the

conversation develops the priest's position becomes more uncertain. Hippolytus rejects God, but the priest appeals to his sense of public moral and ethical responsibility to accept a disturbing distinction between public and private behaviour:

> Your sexual indiscretions are of no interest to anyone. But the stability of the nation's morals is. You are a guardian of those morals. You will answer to God for the collapse of the country you and your family lead.
>
> (Kane (2001), p. 94)

The discussion ends with Hippolytus rejecting God and monarchy: "Fuck God. Fuck the monarchy," (p. 95) and in turning the tables on the priest who has come to hear his confession.

Hippolytus's appeal to "free will" leads directly to a sexual perversion that directly contradicts his claim that his behaviour is human rather than animal:

> **Hippolytus** Last line of defence for the honest man.
> Free will is what distinguishes us from the animals.
> *He undoes his trousers.*
> And I have no intention of behaving like a fucking animal.
> **Priest** *Performs oral sex on* **Hippolytus**.
> **Hippolytus** Leave that to you.
> *He comes.*
> *He rests his hand on top of the* **Priest's** *head.*
> Go
> Confess.
> Before you burn.
>
> (p. 97)

Everything that Hippolytus touches in the play appears to be tainted, and he taints all of those he comes into contact with. Earlier, in scene 4, Phaedra prefers to talk to Hippolytus rather than talk to her daughter Strophe because, she says: "I love you." Hippolytus asks, "Why?," and her response exposes the contradictory 'illogical' nature of her love:

> You're difficult. Moody, cynical, bitter, fat, decadent, spoilt. You stay in bed all day then watch TV all night, you crash around this house with

sleep in your eyes and not a thought for anyone. You're in pain. I adore you.

(p. 79)

Phaedra is not torn between two equally substantial alternatives here, nor is she the victim of some metaphysical strategy. Like Hippolytus, she lives for and in the moment without any thought of the ethics or indeed of the morality of what she is doing. Phaedra's "love" then is as destructive as Hippolytus's, and the play contains no positive vision of a society, but only momentary fragments that don't cohere. Phaedra's death is, therefore, meaningless, and the play ends at her funeral with an anonymous crowd baying for the death of Hippolytus. In the completely wild outbreak of violence that follows Theseus, caught up in the frenzy, rapes the Woman and kills his daughter, Strophe, who dies uttering their names:

> **Woman 1** What sort of a woman are you?
> **Theseus** Defending a rapist.
> **Theseus** *pulls* **Strophe** *away from* **Woman 2** *who she is attacking.*
> *He rapes her.*
> *The crowd watch and cheer.*
> *When* **Theseus** *has finished he cuts her throat.*
> **Strophe** Theseus.
> Hippolytus.
> Innocent.
> Mother.
> Oh, Mother.

(p. 101)

This orgy of violence is a cruel parody of a sacrificial ritual, with Woman 2 castrating Hippolytus, and Theseus disembowelling him. Only after this orgy of violence is complete does Theseus realise the horror of what he has done, regretting both the rape and the murder of Strophe. The last words of the play are uttered by the dying Hippolytus as Theseus commits suicide:

> **Theseus** *cuts his own throat and bleeds to death.*
> *The three bodies lie completely still.*

> *Eventually Hippolytus opens his eyes and looks at the sky.*
> **Hippolytus** Vultures.
> *He manages a smile.*
> If there could have been more moments like this.
> **Hippolytus** *dies.*
> *A vulture descends and begins to eat his body.*
>
> (p. 103)

These horrifying events are merely "moments" in an otherwise meaningless life. Here mutilation and death are not really elements in some larger pattern of punishment and justice; in fact the play opposes itself to the tragic pattern that, given the evolution of Euripides' play, we might have come to expect. There is no humanism nor, indeed, humanity in evidence here, and the play is literally post-human but in a thoroughly negative sense. Beckett's characters seek to alleviate the boredom by diverting attention from it. In Kane's play there is a residual Beckettian logic of dependency, but the diversions are the horrific results of an aristocracy bored with its excesses and completely lacking in restraint. If there is tragedy here, then it is the tragedy of a class, pampered and decadent, that perverts everything it touches, even the rituals that in their original form are designed to encourage growth and renewal. Death only affords masochistic pleasure, and the moment of death is possibly the only time when the castrated and eviscerated Hippolytus "manages a smile."

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY TRAGEDY? TOM STOPPARD'S *LEOPOLDSTADT*

Kane's disturbing play rings a series of changes on what we might normally describe as tragedy, as much by its association with content as with dramatic form. Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* (2020), has been described as a 'tragedy,' although he appears to have both accepted and rejected the appellation; in 2020 he seems to have resisted it on the grounds that he finds genre labels inaccurate and constraining, even though the play's subject matter, stretching from 1899 to 1955, is tragic in the sense that we experience vicariously the devastation that a Jewish family experiences within the larger historical context of the first half of the twentieth century. The distinction between the description of

tragedy as a distinct methodology with a formal structure, on the one hand, and the subject matter of tragedy dealing with serious matters, including death on the other, is an important one that allows Stoppard to depart from what he calls methodology, while emphasising the play's content. When, in a recent interview he said, "I don't write tragedy," he did not reject the serious tone of his play, which he described as 'dramatic;' rather he was resisting the traditional view of tragedy which, as we have seen, critics such as George Steiner have championed. If we accept that the *content* of tragedy is constantly subject to historical change, and that it does not need to replicate the *formal* structure of tragedy, then Stoppard's play is as avant garde as Sarah Kane's despite their differences.

Kane's play modernises the Phaedra story from Euripides and Seneca onwards, and heavily revises the tone of the originals, although it retains their scope. Stoppard discards the residually Aristotelian preoccupation with the unity of time, although he sets his play in one place, an apartment in the Viennese district of Leopoldstadt between 1899 and 1955, and he traces the fortunes of a particular Jewish family and their relatives. Although the dialogue is naturalistic we are offered snapshots of the lives of the various members of "two intermarried Jewish families" (Stoppard (2020), p. 3), whom we encounter initially as members of "the prosperous end of Viennese bourgeoisie." (p. 3) Interspersed with the different generations of family chatter, Ludwig and Hermann discuss the professional fortunes of a professional psychologist (Freud), Jewish family traditions, anti-Semitic prejudice and the Christian tradition of Christmas. None of these issues are systematically explored, but they figure as current preoccupations as the families gather together in 1899 in order to give us an impression of the anxieties of this extended family at a particular moment in time. Those anxieties will alter significantly as the family's fortunes change through two world wars and their devastating consequences. The horror of those consequences reaches a climax in scene 8 when in 1938, a "Civilian" bureaucrat enters the Jewish matriarch's flat that is now "cold" with its occupants "wearing extra clothes, shawls etc." (p. 64) What in the previous six scenes were recurring topics of conversation now take on a much more threatening tone as the explicit consequences of the spread of German fascism are now made explicit. This then becomes the tragedy of a family and of a race that has no power to control its own

destiny. Stoppard allows us to glimpse the elements of a fate that is beginning to take the shape of what we recognise retrospectively as the Holocaust.

However, the seriousness of the situation is initially mitigated by the family's resilient acceptance of a fate whose future *we* know but they don't. The mathematical logic of that fate is encapsulated in the image of the "cat's cradle" initially, and, in the hands of Ludwig's grandson Leo, a children's game with string, but is symbolically possessed of a much deeper meaning. It is a symbol of the irrepressible human capacity for play, and for the mathematical order that underpins human society. As Ludwig explains to his nephew Nathan,

> **Ludwig** If you didn't know it was cat's cradle, there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the way the knots change their address. And if I wrote down the addresses for you, how could you find the rule that turns one set of three numbers into another set? You might as well look for the rule that makes a fly go this way and then that way. But, as it happens, we do know, like God, that everything unfolded from our game of cat's cradle. Each state came out of the previous one. So there is order underneath. Mathematical order. But how can we discover it?
>
> (pp. 67–8)

This image and the questions it provokes encapsulate the fate of this Jewish family: they enact only the order and the rituals that they know in the face of an 'order' whose details are beyond their comprehension. Unlike in the case of classical tragedy, they are in no position to respond to an order that they cannot understand. Indeed, they respond to their fate by keeping alive the very domestic rituals that identify them as members of a persecuted race, and they harbour dreams about future stability that, as audience, we know will culminate in the Holocaust.

Many of the ingredients of tragedy are present in Stoppard's play, although not necessarily in the order that we have become accustomed to. Death is a pervasive threat, with the play ending in scene 9 with a flashback to the year 1900. The event of the Passover *seder* is recalled by Gretl, as a "search party" looks for the *affikomen* (the largest piece broken from a portion of unleavened bread or *matzos*) and also the first days of the *Anschlus* in 1938 are relived. Grandma Merz (1899), her daughter

Eva (1938) and Rosa, twin daughter of Ernst and Wilma (sister of Ludwig who is son-in-law of Grandma Merz) recall pre-World War II days and what remains in their collective and suppressed memory: in particular in relation to the whereabouts of "Great Aunt Gretl's portrait" recalled by Nathan who is the grandson of Ernst and Wilma. This complicated family tree is not important for our purposes, but the memories, real and fabricated, and the various fates of members of the extended family, are. These narrative remnants of social, religious and cultural institutions act as counters to the 'reality' of power, which in Nazi ideology "the concentration camp is nowadays the secret paradigm." (Supiot (2021), p. 127) Stoppard's play explores, among other things, the means of acquiring knowledge but it firmly resists a brutal quasi-scientific model of power that seeks to classify, record and, in extreme cases, exterminate. This is the tragedy of a representative extended and intermarried family faced with responding to a catastrophe whose outcome they are unable to control. Inside the general tragedy of war, persecution and the Holocaust there are individual tragedies, of lives cut short, of oppression, all bound together by the preservation and repetition of domestic religious rituals and by memories. There is no recompense for suffering in this play, or, indeed, no ultimate balance achieved, although the result is not, as in Sarah Kane's play, a sardonic delight in pain and the act of suffering itself. If Kane's response is one that jettisons any form of humanism, Stoppard wants to preserve it as a means of survival. The final irony of *Leopoldstadt* is that no balance or *catharsis* is achieved. Memory recedes and is filed away as Leo folds the paper family tree, even though the survivors simply replicate the places onstage of their deceased elders just as Hanna's piano playing fades.

CONCLUSION

In his conclusion to *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* Simon Critchley suggests that "Tragedy is defined by the quasi-dialectical rhythm of unification and division, where the unity with the divine gives way to the disunity of the self from itself." (Critchley (2019), p. 173) Elsewhere I have put the matter a little differently with the suggestion that "tragedy retains its ambivalence in that it uncovers the very contradictions that it sets out aesthetically to domesticate, and those contradictions are located at *both* the personal and public levels of communal experience." (Drakakis (1992), p. 18, emphasis in original) While both these positions reflect aspects of the history of tragedy, the variations that we have been charting in earlier chapters reflect a problem that is endemic to the practice of history itself. This is what Michel Foucault has to say about the relation between history and what he labels (following Nietzsche) "genealogy":

> History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin.
>
> (Foucault (1977), p. 145)

In resisting what he calls "the solemnities of the origin" (p. 143) he opts for "[a] genealogy of values, morality, asceticism" that "will never confuse itself with a quest for their 'origins', will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history." (p. 144)

The shifts of emphasis evident in previous chapters have attempted to respond to some of these "vicissitudes," but there has always been a tension between a master narrative of tragedy and the conditions under which it is claimed to thrive, and those substantive deviations that, in various ways, are resistant to the model inscribed in Aristotle. The opposition has been between the nostalgic and elitist view of tragedy as exemplified in Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) and cultural critics and practitioners such as Raymond Williams, Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal (to name but a few) who have paid far more attention to 'the vicissitudes of history'. Even when, in his *Antigones* (1986) Steiner charts "the Antigone myth in Western literature and thought," his concern is with its persistence through time and to a thematising of a Sophoclean original. As we saw in the last chapter, it would have been impossible to take this approach in relation to Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, or indeed to Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* since these plays resist categorically, though in different ways, any sense of a unifying narrative rooted in the exemplary actions of a protagonist, and it is doubtful whether in Kane's case particularly, it might elicit pleasure from an audience. Indeed, if, as Terry Eagleton suggests, a significant feature of tragedy is its provision and production of "sweet violence," there can be little doubt that in Kane's play all there is *is* violence and it is anything but "sweet." Even in gruesome death Hippolytus longs for "more moments like this" (Kane (2001), p. 103) and we are left with no sense of a "quasi-dialectical rhythm of unification and division," but with the actual dismemberment of a human body, a *sparagmos* without meaning, and a masochistic longing for more such "moments." In the case of Stoppard we are looking at the tragedy of a race and the history that cultural memory keeps the past alive.

One other issue concerns the association of tragedy with humanism and the various debates about its history. Since Aristotle the human subject has been at the centre of tragedy and his (usually his) suffering has led to a conclusion in which some compensation is made for it. Of course, not all the ancient Greek tragedians are unanimous in their focus, but as the human subject has come to be defined differently, so

have the mechanics of tragedy and its focus. The transportability of its claimed essence, from drama into fiction and poetry, as well as its persistence in drama encourage an essentialist viewpoint and force a connection between, say, tragedy and the novel, or even between the events of tragedy and everyday occurrences. We saw how Brecht exposed some of the ways in which tragedy could become enlisted by the agencies of commercial power, and as I write the recent deposition of *two* British prime ministers is being narrativised by their spin doctors as 'tragedies'. It would appear that both incompetence and lying are now 'fatal flaws' and that we are expected to show sympathy for a spectacular downfall. The distinction between *hamartia*, incompetence and political stupidity has all but been elided. The model for this debacle would, of course, be Shakespeare's *Richard III* and it is surprising that up to now the connection has not been made. The point is that it is far too easy to model actual events along the lines of a narrative that we might call tragic. At the same time, there are many events in the world over which human beings have no control and that often lead to human death. We often think of such deaths as 'senseless,' that is, events that have neither rhyme nor reason and that are, at the end of the day, meaningless. A metaphorical death of a national leader caught in the act of lying and lawbreaking has no philosophical depth to it, nor can we bend it to yield one. Apparently, those who served in Boris Johnson's cabinet now appeal to his 'humanity' since all human beings are, apparently, flawed, even though the evidence suggests that this humanity is of a very specific kind and should be distinguished from 'humanism.' The same case is now being made for the hapless Liz Truss in the UK, and for Donald Trump in the US. However, we usually think of the actions of a tragic hero as being of the kind that cannot be reduced to matters of selfish desire. Tragedy involves actions that extend beyond the self-satisfaction of the protagonist, and it is this that attracts the terms 'humanism' and 'essentialism.'

But these terms should not be regarded as irreducible. Materialist approaches to tragedy have shown us that histories are much more complex and contradictory, and that since the challenging of the efficacy of grand narratives there can be no single or exclusive meaning. For example, the recent fall of two British prime ministers (and the idea of a 'fall' already introduces part of the vocabulary of tragedy) is thought by their supporters to be 'tragic,' but to their political opponents it is

simply a comic farce irrespective of the serious consequences. Indeed, the discourse of tragedy, its narrative coherence, has so saturated our everyday lives that it is difficult not to think about events and contingencies as elements of existing aesthetic structures (tragic or comic, or even tragi-comic). Even so, writers can still insist that tragedy only occurs in certain circumstances. This is the position that Albert Camus adopted in a 1955 essay on 'The Future of Tragedy' when he said that:

> Tragedy occurs when man, through pride (or even through stupidity, as in the case of Ajax) enters into conflict with the divine order, personified by a god or incarnated in society. The more justified this revolt, and the more necessary this order, then the greater the tragedy which stems from the conflict.
>
> (Camus (1990) p. 197)

This is of a piece with Georg Lukács' observation in "The Metaphysics of Tragedy" that tragedy and democracy are uneasy bedfellows. It is worth reminding ourselves of the way in which Lukács puts it:

> In vain has our democratic age claimed an equal right for all to be tragic; all attempts to open this kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit have proved fruitless. And those democrats who are consistent about their demand for equal rights for all men have always disputed tragedy's right to existence.
>
> (Lukács (1974), p. 173)

As a response to this we need to ask whether tragedy *needs* to have a metaphysical dimension. Despite the fact that he occasionally resorted to a traditional vocabulary of tragedy, the North American playwright Arthur Miller did not think so, nor did Brecht or Augusto Boal. Moreover, as soon as we contemplate the prospect of meaningless or senseless death we are thrown back onto a contemplation of the material forces that oppress the individual human life. And where the political formation extols individualism and freedom of individual action then either everybody is potentially capable of tragic action or nobody is. Or, to put the matter a little differently, tragedy becomes a *social* rather than a metaphysical problem. Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* with which we ended the last chapter both expose

what happens in a society where even the 'order' to which the play's title might appeal in an historical sense is absent, so that we are left with nothing more than an utterly perverse recurring desire, an inhuman brutality and an absolute contempt for the human. In Kane's play, even a philosophy of redemption, such as the Priest's declaration of Christian principles, is treated as ineffectual by one who succumbs to the very animality which Hippolytus claims (although perhaps entirely sardonically) to oppose. The occasion is worth repeating:

> **Hippolytus** Last line of defense for the honest man.
> Free will is what distinguishes us from the animals.
> *He undoes his trousers.*
> And I have no intention of behaving like a fucking animal.
> **Priest** *Performs oral sex on* **Hippolytus**
> **Hippolytus** Leave that to you.
> *He comes.*
> *He rests his hand on top of the* **Priest's** *head.*
> Go.
> Confess.
> Before you burn.
>
> (Kane (2001) p. 97)

Perhaps we need hardly point out that the act of oral sex is little more than an acknowledgement of guilt for which confession is wholly inadequate in the circumstances. Christianity itself as it appears in this play is just another broken narrative, wholly without continuity. We are left, therefore, with this question: aside from the reference to Euripides, is this tragedy?

In the case of Stoppard's play, we live daily with the memory of the Holocaust even though its survivors are dwindling in number. While *Leopoldstadt* is concerned with questions of 'knowledge' and 'truth,' it is also more persistently concerned with the family as the microcosm of a society in which power and victimhood are the issues and where a complex culture and its annual rituals can be swept away through inhuman violence. Stoppard's is one approach to 'tragedy' and Kane's may be another, but in the previous chapters we have been concerned with the various ways in which tragedy has emerged and become susceptible to particular historical, philosophical, cultural and, indeed, psychological pressures. Old patterns of form have been repeated, or

have been the subject of innovation, or, indeed, have been thoroughly dismantled. In the post-modern (and, some think, the post-human) world the last vestige of tragedy, the figure of the isolated suffering and active protagonist has all but disappeared. In their place are the pleasures of deadly perversion, or the fates of entire cultures who are at the mercy of forces that borrow a traditional vocabulary in order to mask barbarism. In the Jacobean period Elizabethan high tragedy gave way to what might be called 'tragical satire.' Kane's *Phaedra's Love* fits easily into this category, while the wit of Stoppard's doomed family is an inadequate protection against forces of sickening barbarism. Perhaps the singularity of tragedy has had its day and in the post-modern post-human world it is a strand of experience that cannot be separated from others.

GLOSSARY

action the primary concern of tragedy for Aristotle, elevated above 'character.' The elements of 'action' collectively comprise the 'plot' and, for Aristotle, this proceeds along a clearly defined path.

aesthetic the philosophical study of artistic beauty, made popular by Hegel and Kant, as a separate and independent area of study.

anagnorisis a point in the plot at which there is a moment of recognition that extends beyond what the protagonist may intend. It is a point where new knowledge and its consequences are finally recognised.

anti-humanism a train of philosophical thought that resists the emphasis on the 'human' as an essential category of being. It is linked usually with 'post-humanism' which emphasises a reversal of the posture that places 'the human' at the centre of things as the measure of all things. This also leads on to 'individualism' which posits the autonomy and freedom of the human subject.

catharsis a term used in Aristotle's *The Poetics* that is usually associated with the purgation of the particular emotions

of 'pity' and 'fear.' It describes the effects of tragedy on an audience who are returned at the end of a tragedy to a situation in which their emotions are in balance.

chorus on the Greek stage a group of actors who comment on the action through a combination of song, dance and recitation. As drama developed the role of the chorus could be taken by a single actor.

dialectic a mode of philosophical thinking that proposes a thesis, an antithesis and a synthesis as a means of obtaining access to knowledge. It became popular in the eighteenth century with Hegel and was later associated by Marx with dialectical materialism as a primary means of defining the nature of things and of the interaction between classes in human society.

dithyramb a choral song sung to the accompaniment of a flute, originally to the god Dionysus, but later performed at other seasonal rituals.

Enlightenment the term used to signal the birth of rational thought, which began in Britain and on the continent of Europe in the eighteenth century.

epic a narrative that recounted the actions and adventures of heroic figures. Some of these narratives were adapted to form part of the material of early tragedy.

fatalism the philosophy that all things are determined by fate and therefore are beyond human control.

Fortune designates the categories that are wholly beyond human control. A secular force that in religious societies can sometimes be associated with the power of a divinity.

hamartia usually translated as 'tragic flaw,' referring to errors that the tragic protagonist makes. The privileging of 'action' over 'character,' however, directs us away from the character's psychology and towards the impossibility of the choices that the protagonist is forced to make.

ideology a complex term that has different meanings. It can be a collection of ideas, but more recently it is regarded as the collective term for a system of beliefs that operates beneath the level of consciousness. The French Marxist

Louis Althusser described it as the natural way in which human beings live their real relations of production. This interpretation presupposes that there is such a thing as a political unconscious. Marx used the term, but to describe the illusions that underpinned human behaviour.

logos   a Greek word used to refer to human reason, but also in Christian thought to divine rationality as the principle governing the universe.

materialism   a complex term that is usually associated with the emphasis on the primacy of material conditions in the shaping or determining of human affairs. Radical philosophies, such as Marxism, hold that it is possible to change the material conditions of existence and thereby interfere politically in order to do so.

metalanguage   a language that comments on language itself but from an exalted position that transcends it.

metaphysics   the branch of philosophy that deals with what transcends the physical or natural world.

mimesis   a fictional imitation designed to narrate or dramatise an 'action.' In Aristotle this is a particular function of tragic art.

Moira   a synonym for 'fate' that was also the means of demarcating the boundaries between different categories of experience including that between life and death.

myth   a fictional narrative that seeks to explain natural phenomena. Usually associated with religion but also associated in secular society with ideology.

mythos   a system of beliefs that expresses, sometimes in symbolic terms and through a range of narratives, the dominant attitudes of a community and culture.

neo-classicism   a branch of aesthetics which resurrected and imitated the example of the Classics in art and literature, and which became popular during the eighteenth century.

ontology   an area of scientific knowledge within the field of metaphysics concerned with being or the essence of things.

peripeteia   a reversal of the progress of the plot in which a situation is changed into its opposite.

pharmakos   identified by ethnologists as a figure who embodied both 'good' and 'evil.' Traced back to Plato but now used to describe a focus of the co-existence of 'good' and 'evil,' but also identified as a figure endowed with the power to both harm and cure.

poetic justice   when virtue is rewarded and vice punished. A moralistic account of tragedy in which justice is meted out according to the predilections of the dramatic characters.

post-humanism   technically 'post-humanism' extends and expands the challenge to singular meaning by attacking the 'humanism' and the 'human' that provides the foundation for classical accounts of tragedy. The aim is to foreground issues such as gender, race and class as defining characteristics and to challenge the essentialism upon which humanism depends.

post-modern   that which succeeds the 'modern,' but also the state of knowledge that follows on from the 'linguistic turn,' and that challenges singular and organic meaning in favour of pluralism and the co-existence of multiple truths. To be distinguished from scepticism which doubts the existence of any truth.

protagonist   the central figure in a tragedy around whom the action revolves.

Providence   a divine force that determines human actions, and whose operations were never openly disclosed.

Renaissance humanism   a term that denotes the emphasis on what is human that came to the fore during the Renaissance with the rediscovery of classical texts. To be distinguished from the term 'Enlightenment' which denotes the eighteenth-century shift from superstition to rationality.

ressentiment   hostility towards an object or a person that can be identified as the cause of one's own frustration and the apportioning blame as a result. Tragedy can be read as a form that articulates blame, usually in the form of projecting onto the tragic protagonist faults with which the spectator can both identify vicariously and resent.

ritual   usually associated with religious practices and actions designed to bind societies together.

Schadenfreude   the pleasure that can be derived from the suffering of others. This is something that can be attributed to the experience of classical tragedy where the spectator can take pleasure in the suffering of the tragic protagonist.

scepticism   originally the term associated with the followers of the Greek philosopher Pyrrhon (376–270 B.C.) who doubted that it was possible to ascertain truth of any kind. This became the basis of philosophical scepticism which maintained that knowledge of existence could not be obtained with certainty.

sparagmos   the Greek term used to describe ritual dismemberment (usually of the human body or of an animal) as part of a Dionysiac rite. Associated also with the death of the tragic hero.

subjectivity   the assembly of all that goes into making the human subject. This is different from the autonomous figure that is usually referred to as 'character' since it presupposes that the subject is both the determining element of a grammatical sentence, but also, ambiguously, that the 'subject' is subjected to forces (external, political, social, cultural, sexual and psychological) that determine its shape and being. In the post-human world the subject becomes 'non-unitary' comprising connections between 'self' and 'other,' including non-human 'others.' In this modified version the subject becomes 'nomadic' and mobile, exposing concepts such as 'autonomy' as illusory.

sublime   in art and nature, designed to inspire awe, reverence or aesthetic beauty and associated with grandeur or vastness.

thargelia   a harvest festival that was celebrated in May, and that was dedicated to the god Apollo.

tradition   elements of past culture handed down from generation to generation, which offer models that help to establish continuity between past and present. Radical challenges to the concept of tradition propose that it

represents an interpretation of the past which suggests that it is neither singular nor neutral.

Trauerspiel translated in English as 'mourning play.' Walter Benjamin links it with tragedy, but distinguishes it from ancient Greek tragedy.

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